

COMPLETE

COWBOY

WILD WESTERN STORIES

DRAW OR DIE

Greatest Horse Novel
by T. W. FONG

2 BIG NOVELS

**OUTLAW
GUNS**

Complete Novel
By MARK HANCOCK

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED - THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JO



I Trained These Men



**Chief Operator
Broadcasting Station**
Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator. **HOLLIS F. HAYES, 327 Madison St., Lapeer, Michigan.**

Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio Service Manager for the M— Furniture Co. for their four stores. **JAMES E. RYAN, 119 Pebble Court, Fall River, Mass.**



\$10 a Week Extra In Spare Time

I am doing spare time Radio work, and I am averaging around \$500 a year. Those extra dollars mean so much—the difference between just barely getting by and living comfortably. **JOHN WASH-KO, 97 New Cranberry, Hazleton, Penna.**



In U. S. Signal Corps

I am in the U. S. Army, Signal Corps, as Chief Radio Clerk. My duties also include maintenance of the transmitter and receivers when the Chief Radio Operator is absent. **R. W. ANDERSON, Radio Station WTL, Vancouver Barracks, Washington.**



I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME in your spare time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make \$5, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

Real Opportunities for Beginners to Learn then Earn Up to \$50 a Week

Over 800 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are over 50,000,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio for those jobs. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained. Many are getting special ratings in the Army and Navy; extra rank and pay.

I'll Show You How to Make \$5, \$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio

Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. IKA2,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**



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Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times private's or seaman's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. **IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW.**

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

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City State



WILD WESTERN STORIES

COMPLETE COWBOY

VOL. 3.—NO. 2

OCTOBER, 1941

A COMPLETE BOOK LENGTH NOVEL

OUTLAW GUNS by Mat Rand 10

The deadliest human being who ever lived. Probably no man ever walked the earth who was quite as dangerous as that amazing character known to Western history as Billy The Kid. An historical authentic novel of the West's most famous gunman.

A COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

DRAW OR DIE by T. W. Ford 76

An arrow-scarred arm reached out of the night and blasted down his dad from behind. So young Tuss Sloan took the retribution trail. But before sunrise, he was branded a gun coyote and slated to stretch rope. An outlaw spread beckoned and he hit the Gunshot Road, trigger finger proddy and young eyes deadly cold with a hate for the Law of men.

A SMASHING SHORT STORY

LAW WEST OF THE PECOS...by Kenneth P. Wood 104

When men were men and law rode in the holster, "Judge" Roy Bean held a full house in the gamble that was life!

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AGES 1 TO 75

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down to us about them. For those who collect or carry such Tokens we present, for the first time, a collection of Talismanic Curios. All statements made in describing them are those of writers of standard works and are not to be construed as our own opinions.

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'GREY GHOST' BRAND
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There are many legends about the Lodestone. Some regard it as a living thing thought to serve as protection to the wearer. It has been written that the Romans and Assyrians thought it attracted and kept love secure. In India many believed it preserved vigor and vitality. Numerous Mexicans carry it in their belts that it may give success in their undertakings. Ours are genuine, powerful, alive "grey ghost" brand Lodestone only—Item No. 1 **50c**



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The symbols on this ring are supposed to denote "Good Luck, Health, Happiness" and so it is in demand by many people because of its alleged legendary background. In ladies' mens' styles. Non tarnishing chromium finish. Item No. 9 **35c**

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JOHN THE CONQUEROR
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This curious Root has had many legends told of it and it is said that many in the Caribbean Islands and even our own Southland carry it at all times. Because it was thought to have "reproductive properties" the custom arose of carrying it always near money. We offer to collectors not only a genuine John the Conqueror Root but also a handsome, silvery oxidized finish John the Conqueror Ring as a symbol of the Root. A real value **\$1.00** at our price. Item No. 8...



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WITH 3 SIMULATED
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Ancient philosophers believed the power of Cleopatra and the Pharaohs came from the serpent. They also believed that the RUBY was a talisman of good Fortune, Wisdom, Power and Success. This Serpentine ring of silvery, oxidized finish has 3 entwined serpents each set with simulated Ruby. **FREE** Table of alleged Fortunate days with each Ring—Item No. 4... **\$1.00**



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The moonstone has been referred to as "the sacred stone of India" and books on folklore state that it brings Good Fortune, protects travellers and reconciles lovers. This pendant has 14 brilliants resembling **DIAMONDS** around the simulated **MOONSTONE**. Looks very **\$1.00** expensive. Item No. 11...

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From the Fabled Indian Country of Nevada

The Arabs called the turquoise "Fayruz" which means "The Lucky Stone" and they wore it as an amulet. In Persia it was esteemed as a stone of good omen while the Indians of our Southwest prized it most highly. Ours are genuine turquoise stones from the fabled Indian country of Nevada. Item No. 5... **25c**

TALISMANIC SEALS



From the famous 'Lost' 6th and 7th Books of Moses Seals and Psalm Cards have been carried for centuries by Phoenicians, Gnostics and Hebrews in many countries for inspiration. Many have been found in ancient manuscripts which state that they were used for many purposes including: to secure favor, love, friendship, success, protection, etc. We offer 6 different **SEALS** with Psalms. Item No. 6... **50c**

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☐ I enclose payment. Send post. paid with **FREE** book.

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Make a ring around each item you may wish to order.

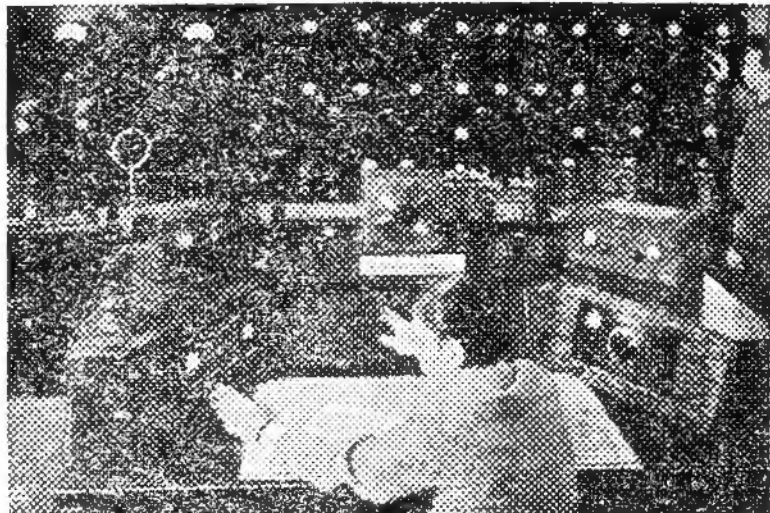
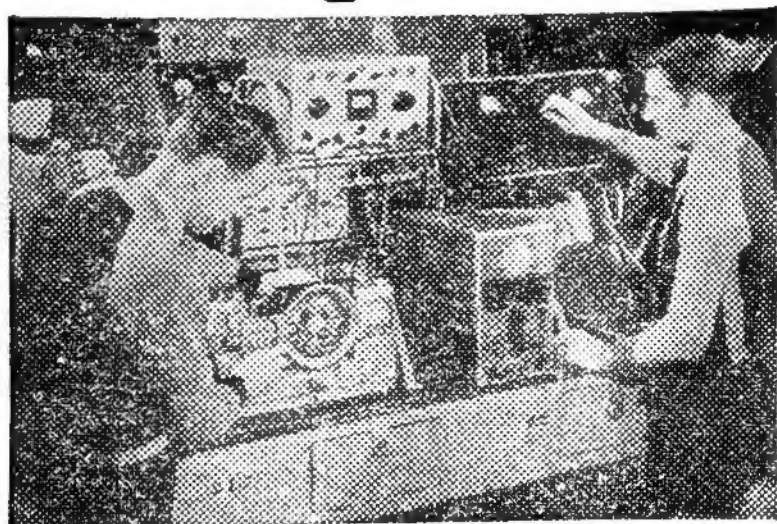
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Inspector in Radio Factory
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City.....State.....

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL

RADIO DIVISION

H. C. Lewis, President, Dept. C1-5E

500 S. Paulina St.

Founded 1899

CHICAGO, ILL.

FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



GORE PRODUCTS, Inc.

D. A.

880 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY STATE.....

PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.



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MILLIONS of DOLLARS
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The lapsed weekly-payment policies that you consider worthless, or without cash value, may be worth considerable money **RIGHT NOW!** No matter how long since you stopped paying premiums—regardless of what the policies state or what anyone may have told you—your policies may be worth **IMMEDIATE CASH!**

Every day, with the help of the National Refund Company, large numbers of people are securing money for such policies. All of **YOUR** lapsed weekly-payment policies may have **PRESENT CASH VALUE.** If your lapsed policies are in a large insurance company, you have an excellent chance of receiving immediate cash. Simply list the policies of yourself and family on the **INFORMATION FORM** printed below; then mail it at once to the National Refund Company.

NO COST OR OBLIGATION

Unless you receive cash for your policies, this service will cost you nothing and you will be under no obligation whatever. **You have everything to gain and nothing to lose.** Just fill in and mail the **INFORMATION FORM.** Be sure to answer all questions as to each policy. If you do not know exactly how many years premiums were paid, estimate to the best of your knowledge. The sooner you send the **INFORMATION FORM** the quicker you may secure cash. **Do it NOW!**



Even though your lapsed weekly-payment life insurance policies state that there is **NO CASH VALUE**—no matter how long since you stopped paying premiums and regardless of what anyone may have told you—Your policies may be worth **IMMEDIATE CASH.** It costs you nothing to find out.

DO NOT SEND YOUR POLICIES

Just fill in and mail the **INFORMATION FORM** that is printed below. Be sure to answer all questions as to each policy. This information will be analyzed carefully. You will then be advised how you can secure the cash to which your policies may entitle you.



MAIL THIS INFORMATION AT ONCE!

Name of Insurance Co.	Policy Number	Present Age of Persons Insured	Number of Years Premiums Paid	CHECK KIND OF POLICY		
				Ordinary or Whole Life	20-Pay Life	Endowment
1.				☐	☐	☐
2.				☐	☐	☐
3.				☐	☐	☐

Be sure to list **ALL** lapsed weekly-payment policies—use separate sheet of paper if necessary.

NATIONAL REFUND COMPANY, DEPT. H6, 9 W. WASHINGTON ST., CHICAGO, ILL.

You are to inform me as to such of the above policies that you select for your service. I am to pay you nothing and I will be under no obligation whatsoever unless money is received. Regardless of what any insurance company or its agents may write or say, I solemnly pledge my word of honor and agree that I will promptly pay you a service fee of one-fourth ($\frac{1}{4}$) of the amounts received.

Name..... Address.....
City..... State.....

Do Not Send Your Policies—Keep Them Until You Hear From Us!

The deadliest gunman that ever lived and the deadliest war that ever raged on the Western ranges. . . . Billy the Kid and the famous Lincoln county cattle war.



CHAPTER I

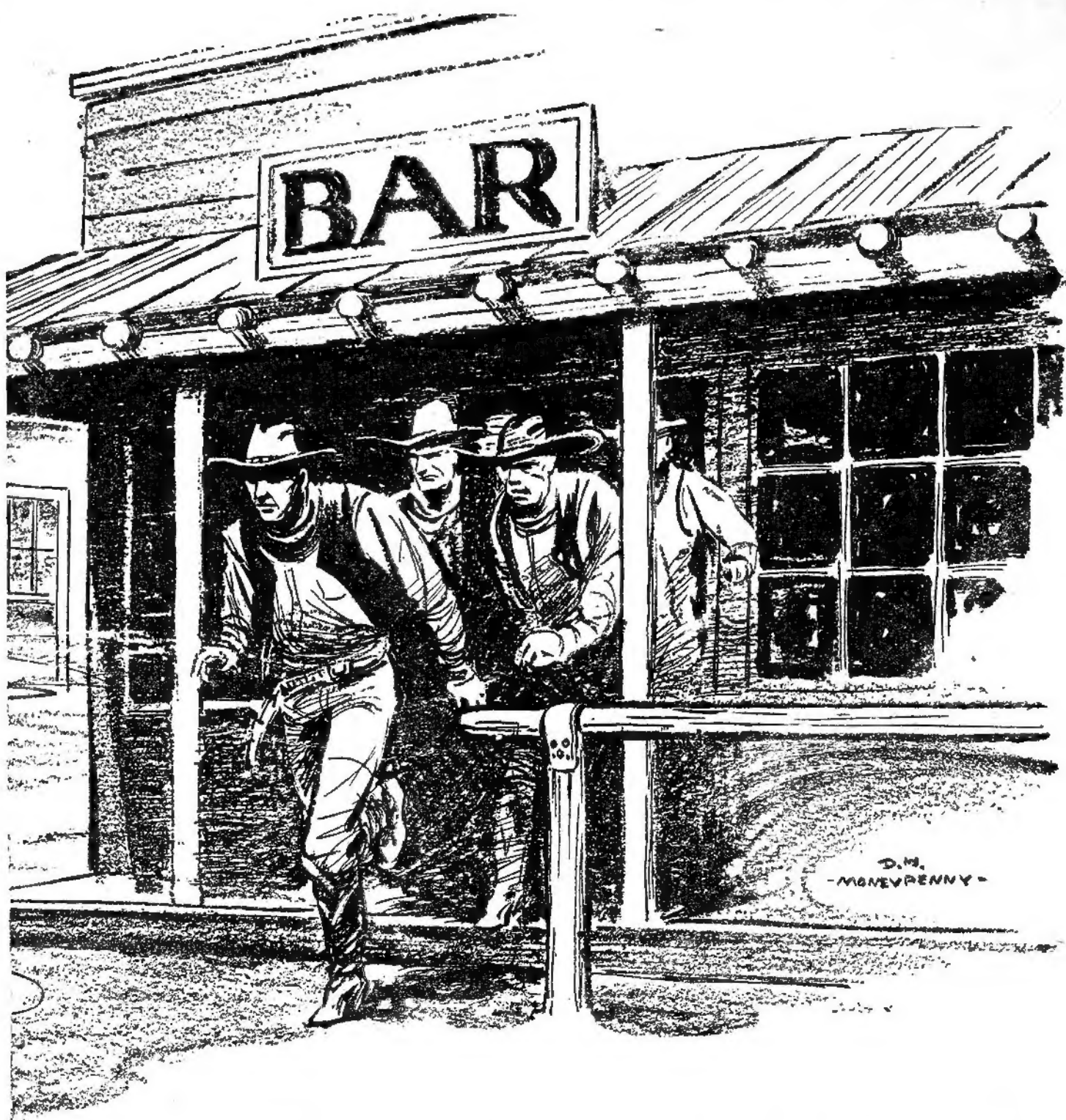
Billy the Kid

FROM the purple Sacramento peaks, six miles from Pinon Creek, a thin dark line of smoke climbed the blue September sky. A bomb-like burst shot upward, spinning. Another burst, dark and round like a printed period. A column again, thin as the first. A third explosive puff.

Dash, dot, dot, dash, dot.

Somewhere behind that rocky western wall a naked Indian, blanketing a smoky fire, was writing a message against the sky. It ended, leaving nothing but the gray-blue haze above the peaks.

Two white-topped wagons, their wheels still wet from the ford on Pinon Creek, crawled slowly up a shallow wash and halted on the mesa rim. A young man



OUTLAW GUNS

A "Billy the Kid" Novel

by MAT RAND

on a dusty roan straightened slowly and flung his arms wide.

"There it is," he said simply. "Short-grass—water—markets within easy reach! Why, there ain't no finer grazin' land on earth! John Chisum drove ten thousand head of longhorns all the way from Concho County, Texas, to settle north of here, and Chisum's smart! . . . Look, Kathie! Yonder's home!"

A girl stood up in the front of the leading wagon and flung her head back, breathing deeply of the thin dry air edged with the tang of sage and pinon pine.

"Oh, Bob, it's beautiful!" Her voice, vibrant and clear, held the music of silver bells. And she, too, was beautiful. Standing so, her slender figure finely moulded against the homespun dress, she might have posed as the figurehead on some rov-

ing Viking ship. Her hair, pulled loosely back into a heavy braid, was like a tight bronze helmet on her head.

"Hit's Injun country, too, boy," the old man on the wagon seat said sharply.

The horseman shrugged. "Nonsense! This is 1877, Uncle Joe; not '49. It's Indian country, certainly, but they're Reservation Indians—markets for our beef—not scalp-hunters!"

The old man spat accurately at a cactus pad beside the wagon wheel. "Seems I've heard rumors that them Reservation Injuns'll lift a scalp, too, when it comes handy. Injuns is Injuns and 'Paches is hell, my son."

"You two!" the girl laughed softly. "Why must you always quarrel?"

A tall stoop-shouldered man shambled past them from the second wagon and spoke to the horseman, his voice thin and whining. "They's a couple o' riders comin' up from fur to the south. I put the glass on 'em. Couple o' outlaws, maybe. Durn such a country!"

The old man on the wagon seat grunted disgustedly and turned to the horses. "Giddap!"

The man on horseback shouted:

"Swing north along the creek, Uncle. We'll keep close to water and camp wherever night catches us."

The old man nodded, still scowling. The girl patted his arm caressingly. "You don't approve of us, do you, Uncle Joe? My brother is too great an optimist and Jess Wilder is too much the opposite!" A thin wailing cry came faintly from the second wagon. "And the Wilder babies cry, poor things! This country is cruel as well as beautiful, isn't it? I wonder if it's worth the suffering it costs?"

The old man spat again, reflectively. "I reckon 'tis," he said. "It gets the weak-lin's, o' course. Out here a man makes a mistake or gets careless once, and likely he'll never get a chance to mend his ways."

The girl smiled, "I suppose I'm a nuisance with my questions—questions—questions! Don't you ever get tired of them?"

The old man grinned a little ruefully. "Take a feller as old as me, Kathie, he'd ruther talk than eat."

She settled herself in the corner of the seat. "I love it!" she said. "Tell me more about Billy the Kid! Jess Wilder spoke of outlaws a while ago and that reminded me. Billy the Kid! That's all I heard in El Paso. Billy killed a man in

Agua Prieta, or in Tucson, or somewhere else; Billy this and Billy that! Even the little Mexican girl who played the guitar for us that night—her eyes shone like stars when she talked of him. 'Beelee the Keed? But yes, Senorita, I have seen heem! He ees so brave—so generous—so handsome—so good!" She would have talked for hours, I think; like some peasant maid in old England relating the virtues of Robin Hood!"

"**B**ILLY the Kid!" the old man nodded. "Idolize him, them people do. I heard a couple o' fellers here in El Paso argyin' t' beat the band, one claimin' he seen Billy kill a man somewhere in Arizona and t'other'n tellin' how he seen The Kid shoot a man in some Texas town. Trouble was, both killin's took place the selfsame night! Well, the jasper that claimed it happened in Arizona was too slow on the draw when it come t' backin' up his argyment, so he musta been lyin'!"

Uncle Joe chuckled whimsically. "When a feller gets a repytation fer bein' quick with guns he gets the blame fer every killin' that takes place within a hundred miles. Likely there's youngsters posin' as The Kid, too; tryin' t' look like and be like him, or anyway t' shift the blame on him fer things they've did."

Uncle Joe tilted his hat back a little, warmed to the subject. "I ain't sayin' The Kid ain't bad, y'understand. I reckon he is. Like enough he's killed a right-smart passel o' men. Fellers that's seen him say he's chain lightnin' with a gun, willin' t' fight yuh at the drop of a hat. He killed his first man when he was a twelve-year-old, they say. Feller insulted Billy's mother and Billy put a knife in him. That was in Silver City, New Mexico, some six years back.

"It stirred up a rumpus, o' course, but when they went lookin' fer Billy he was gone. Lit out alone, his ma said, in the night. Most kids his age woulda hid under the bed and bawled, I reckon, but this'n wasn't made that way. Knowed what he'd done, didn't regret doin' it, figgered he was able t' take care o' himself and started out a-doin' it! That's the kind o' kid he was."

The girl stirred slightly. "Poor little boy!" she said. "Poor, lonely little boy!"

The old man glanced sharply at her before he spoke again. "Never thought of

it that way before, but like enough he was, at that. Time when most young-uns are playin' Injun, Billy was fightin' 'em! Goin' on the dodge that way is a real tough life even fer a man and he was jest a kid. But he made a go of it. Maybe the way he was brung up had somethin' t' do with it, I dunno.

"Yuh see, Billy was born in New York and come West with his folks when he was just a shaver. Daddy died somewhere on the trail and his ma married her another man. They was poor hard-workin' folks and Billy sort o' had t' fetch himself up, so t' speak. Livin' in saloons and gamblin' joints, he mixed with all kinds o' men. He was a bright, quick kid and a born gambler, so I heard; bet yuh his shirt on the turn of a card, or gamble his life on his speed with a gun, or both, and beat yuh, too!

"He's killed some men, o' course. Maybe not as many as folks say, but some. Man that makes a trade o' gamblin' is bound t' get himself into some shootin'. Some folks claim The Kid's a rustler, too, and an all-round bad hombre. I dunno 'bout that."

"But you like him, don't you, Uncle Joe?" Katie was smiling now.

"It ain't a crime, I reckon!" He glared in embarrassment. "But don't *you* go gettin' fool romantic notions in yuhr head! If I jest *thought* yuh was makin' a hero out o' some wuthless, no-count youngster jest cause he'd killed a man or two I'd—by god-freys, big as yuh be and me no kin o' yuhrs even, I'd paddle yuh!"

BOB Haskel, riding up beside them again, caught the old man's final words. "That's right, Uncle Joe," he laughed. He glanced southward as he spoke and the laughter left his lips. "Pull up here, Joe. Wilder's got a lame horse and this is as good a place as any to spend the night. Yonder come some men, too. Kathie, you stay in the wagon till we see what those riders want."

The wagons halted and Uncle Joe climbed stiffly down across the wagon wheel. Kathie turned back into the depths of her own wagon. Outside she heard trampling horses approach.

"Howdy, boys," Bob Haskel called. He held a rifle in the crook of his arm.

"*Salud!*"

The answering voice was youthful and ringing, somehow gay. Yet there was in

both greetings a certain reticence; a tone midway between welcome and challenge.

The gay voice sounded again. "Any objection to our throwin' down here for the night? Somethin' besides jerked beef would go real good, just for a change!"

"Glad to have you." Evidently Haskel's appraisal of the visitors had been a favorable one.

Kathie peeped out.

The smaller of the two strangers had come forward, slapping the trail dust from his clothing with his hat. He was very young, she thought. That was her first impression of him: "How young he is! And how slight!" It was a thought that was to haunt her, afterward; the memory of his boyish slenderness.

The other man was taller, bulkier, older by several years. They were alike in dress; both cowboys, booted and spurred. Both were armed, of course.

The two jut-handled guns, swung low against the youngster's hips from a hand-made double cartridge belt, might well have warned her but Kathie saw them only as an evidence of a boy's desire to mask his age with manly gear. He was so young.

His hair, dark brown and worn a little long, curled wilfully like a little boy's. His eyes were grey and clear, sparkling. He was smiling as he came toward the wagon.

Then he was speaking to Kathie's brother again. "Small party, ain't you, for country like this?"

There was curtness in Haskel's answer: "We figure to be able to take care of ourselves."

The boy shrugged slightly and smiled again. "Why, sure."

Jess Wilder plaintively called Haskel away. Uncle Joe sidled closer, his shrewd old eyes alight and keen.

"Too *damn* small a party, if yuh're askin' me!" he said. "Hit's Injun country, ain't it? You boys a-headin' north too?"

The boy nodded. "Lincoln," he said tersely. "There was smoke sign goin' up from the mountains over west awhile ago. We thought you might need a couple of extra men. I started to tell *him* that," he tilted his head in the direction Haskel had gone, "but he shut me up."

"S-s-sh!" Kathie heard the old man's sibilant warning and hid herself in time to escape his searching glance. The three men had moved away a little when she looked again and their voices reached her only in a murmuring undertone.

A LITTLE fire was crackling pleasantly between the wagons when Kathie joined the circle. Uncle Joe was introducing the Wilders. He turned to her with a gallant flourish.

"And this here is Kathie, boys. Kathleen Haskel, sister t' Bob. I bet she'll cut a swath in Lincoln, heh?" The old man winked and chuckled, patting Kathie's arm.

"But that's only half an introduction, Uncle Joe. Aren't you going to tell me their names?"

"Eh?" Uncle Joe floundered hopelessly. "Gosh-a-mighty, Kathie, did I leave that out? Well, now, I—ah—"

The youngster rescued him, smiling. "I'm William Bonney, Miss Haskel," he said. "And this is Jesse Evans." His smooth quick bow was a thing of grace, contrasting oddly with the larger man's embarrassed awkwardness.

She was puzzled by the sudden change in Bonney's face. His eyes, oddly veiled and lustreless, were staring at Uncle Joe with a strange intensity. She had a feeling that he was alert and poised. She glanced aside at Uncle Joe, bewildered and unaccountably afraid.

The old man was leaning forward slightly, frowning.

"Bonney, d'yuh say? I—I didn't jest catch the name at first . . . Billy Bonney, eh?" He caught the girl's inquiring glance and coughed hackingly, turning away with some incoherent word.

Kathie looked at the boy again and found him smiling. He bowed slightly and walked with quick light steps toward the waiting teams. She saw young Evans speak to him in an undertone; saw Bonney shake his head and heard his quick gay laugh.

She felt a touch upon her arm and turned to face Joe Flack. The old man's eyes were wide and bright with excitement.

"Speak o' the devil!" he whispered. "William Bonney, he says, cool as yuh please! But did yuh see his eyes? *Ready*, that's what he was! Knowed I reckanized him and waited t' see what I aimed t' do! That's what comes o' bein' hunted, see? He never knows, when he meets a man, if it means a handshake or a shoot-out! So he's always cocked!"

"Uncle Joe!" Kathie's voice was low, filled with amazed concern. "Why, what on earth—?"

He shot a quick impatient glance at her. "Why, don't yuh understand? Billy the Kid, sabe? That's him! William Bonney—Billy the Kid!"

He repeated to meet the unbelief he saw in Kathie's eyes. He stared at her, watching the unbelief give way to something else.

"But—you keep away from him, yuh hear?" he said. "You—keep—away—from him!"

CHAPTER II

Night Raid

THE dwindling fire cast a circle of ruddy radiance between the canvas wagons. Kathleen Haskel leaned back against a saddle propped against a wagon wheel. It was very peaceful; fire-light and stars and the low murmur of friendly voices, the sense of open space.

Billy the Kid's voice came to her now, even, self-possessed.

"Chisum's havin' trouble, so I've heard. Claims a lot of Long Rail-Jingle Bob cows are goin' astray between graze and market. Well, it's nothin' new for Chisum to lose cows but it's somethin' new for him to complain about it. It must be serious."

"Pop, what's Long Rail and Jingle Bob?" Young Jack Wilder's voice this time, oddly like his father's in its whining tone.

Kathie heard The Kid's soft laugh. "Why, son, John Chisum's brand is a long straight line runnin' almost the length of the steer. That's the Long Rail, *sabe Usted?* Chisum's earmark is the Jingle Bob; a cut in both ears that lets the under part hang down in a kind of dewlap. You meet one of Chisum's longhorns with his ears jingle bobbed some dark night and you'll never forget it! He's the homeliest brute you'll ever see!"

Uncle Joe chuckled. "That's Gospel, sure! But it's a plumb good mark, at that. Only way t' re-work them ears is t' cut 'em off close up agin the critter's head; and yuh can't blot out the Long Rail either 'thout yuh skin the cow!"

"Chisum's a fine one t' be beefin' about losin' a cow or two!" Jesse Evans' voice was surly, a little edged. "Chisum got his start by brandin' every critter he could lay a rope on, down in Texas."

The Kid's answer was suave yet faintly chiding. "Those were the days when a

cow in Texas wasn't worth the value of his hide. Chisum branded cattle no one else wanted, and now that the railroads have opened up markets he's cashin' in. John Chisum's square, Jess."

"You're mighty right!" This was Bob Haskel speaking now. "Chisum's a white man, I'll tell you! I was buyin' beef for an outfit in 'Frisco all last winter, handlin' a lot of Chisum's stuff. It was him that persuaded me to come out here and take up land."

"John Chisum is my friend," The Kid said flatly. To Kathie it seemed that his remark bore the weight of an ultimatum; a final judgment in an old argument. She saw Jesse Evans shift his position as if in anger, and the light from the fire showed his lowering frown. She was to remember that statement of The Kid's and Jesse Evans' answering anger.

Uncle Joe's half-nasal voice dominated the campfire circle now. "Heard in El Paso how a feller name o' Murphy moved his ranch, lock stock and barr'l, to a range adjoinin' Chisum's just so's it'd be handier fer him t' rustle Chisum's cows!"

A coyote howled mournfully somewhere west of Pinon Creek and Jesse Evans lifted his head abruptly, listening. Kathie saw him glance at Bonney then; saw their eyes meet meaningfully for an instant and break away.

Bob Haskel pulled himself erect, stretching. "Think I'll turn in," he said. "I'll hobble the horses first and turn 'em to graze. Wilder, you might refill that water keg."

BONNEY spoke quietly from beside the fire, drawling a little. "I wouldn't turn the horses loose if I was you, Haskel. I'd picket them."

Haskel turned, staring. "Why, what d'you mean, Bonney?"

"Well, your horses might stray off." Bonney's tone was mild and casual. "And, Wilder, that's a real big keg. Better take Uncle Joe along. *If you take your rifles* you can cradle the keg between the two of you."

There was an emphasis upon that last sentence that Kathie did not miss.

Haskel took a step forward angrily. "Say! You tryin' to run this camp, Bonney? What d'you mean, givin' orders—?"

Joe Flack stood up suddenly, catching Haskel's arm. They moved away together as Uncle Joe silenced Bob with quick

emphatic murmurings. Evans spoke once, sourly. Then all their voices dwindled to an undertone.

Kathie stirred restlessly, staring at the red eye of Bonney's cigaret as it glowed and faded against the darkness.

"That *was* a coyote, wasn't it?" she asked quietly.

He chuckled softly. "You're hard to fool, ain't you, Miss? . . . And hard to scare!"

"You think there's danger, then?"

She saw the eloquent little movement of his shoulders. "It was a two-legged wolf that howled," he said. "And there was smoke-sign over west this afternoon. If it's a small party they'll pass us up. If it's a big one they may try to get the horses."

So, quietly and without stress, young Bonney had bent the camp to his own sure will. Leadership seemed his by natural right.

He leaned forward lazily, lifting an ember from the fire to re-light his cigaret. Kathie spoke impulsively, hardly conscious of her words.

"You are—so young!" she said.

He smiled at her, the firelight in his eyes dancing merrily. "Eighteen next month," he said. "I'll outgrow that!"

"Why, then we're almost twins!" The thought surprised her. She flushed, remembering the elder-sister mental attitude she had unconsciously adopted in her thought of him. Yet in six short years this boy had blazed a name for deadliness in the vivid flame of his magic guns.

Perhaps he read her thoughts for he leaned forward, serious now. "Not even the devil, Miss Haskel, can be as black as people make him out to be!" he said.

She did not answer him. The firelight glinted briefly on a gun at Bonney's hip and Kathie shivered a little, not with cold.

"You're from the East?" His voice broke the silence.

"No. From California. My people came overland in '49. I've been in school in the East the past two years, but my home is here."

"Why, now, that's fine! You see, a girl raised out here knows that a man can't always help dependin' on his guns."

The inference was so obvious that Kathie flushed a little. But his next question was surprisingly casual.

"You've got friends in Lincoln?"

Then she, too, heard her brother's step

as he approached them and she understood The Kid's quick change of tone. She smiled as she answered him. "No. But my brother has."

Bob Haskel's voice was gravely disapproving. "You'd better get some sleep, sis."

Bonney rocked forward suddenly, regaining his feet with that effortless easy grace that marked his every move. "It was thoughtless of me, keepin' you." He reached down toward her and she gave him her hands, allowing him to lift her up. His hands were hardly larger than her own but they were hard and strong.

"Goodnight, Bob. Goodnight, Mr. Bonney." Even as she reached the haven of her wagon she heard Bob's voice again, curt and accusing.

"You've been scarin' her with Indian talk! There wasn't any need of that, was there?"

Bonney's slow answer reached her as the two men turned away. "She knew already, Haskel. And she asked me, point-blank. There wasn't any use lyin' to her. Anyway, she ain't afraid."

JESSE Evans stood beside the fire when Haskel and The Kid returned. "The old man's guardin' the picket line," he said. "If we keep 'em from sneakin' in to stampede the stock we'll be safe till dawn."

"I ain't so sure we're in any danger even now," Haskel said truculently. The Kid shrugged. "I hope you're right!" He spread the embers of the fire with his boot and crushed them out, leaving them in darkness. "Reckon it won't hurt to keep our eyes peeled, just in case. Sit down, Haskel. We're some curious about Chisum's place, Jess and I."

Haskel's enthusiasm smothered his anger. "Why, man, you've never seen a richer range than John Chisum's South Spring ranch! That grazin' land'll grow anything! Chisum's got a double avenue of cottonwood, a section of alfalfa, apple trees, pears, peaches. He's got a 'ledge of roses around his house and he's brought songbirds all the way from Tennessee to stock the place. He's got a brook full of perch runnin' right under his porch!"

"But he keeps on losin' cows!" Evans' dry comment proved he was a man at arms, not a farming man. If there was war in prospect to the north that was a subject worthy of talk. If not . . .

Young Bonney chuckled softly. "Let him tell it his own way, Jess."

Haskel frowned and rolled a cigaret before he spoke again. "Rustlin'? Of course there's rustlin'. Major Murphy is back of it, so Chisum thinks. Murphy's the kingpin in Lincoln; owns a general store and a bank, not to mention that he owns the law! But people are flockin' in—the kind that bring law and order with 'em. Take Tunstall, for instance. He's an Englishman; a tenderfoot, of course, but a fine upstandin' man. He's bought a big outfit on the Rio Feliz. And then there's McSween. He was mixed up with Murphy at first because he didn't know any better, but he's an honest God-fearin' man, McSween is. He's a lawyer."

"McSween?" The Kid's soft voice cut in inquiringly. "Why, that's the man who brought a piano overland by wagon all the way from Trinidad, ain't it? Jess, you and me will have to mend our manners soon and leave our guns at home! This country's gettin' civilized!"

IN THE wagon a dozen yards away Kathleen Haskel listened. The voices died away in a little while and the last flush of moonlight faded from the western peaks, leaving only stars and a breathless silence broken by the faint far murmur of the creek. So Kathie slept at last.

She awakened to the shrill blood-curdling war-cries of Apache braves.

Still dazed with sleep, she saw them sweep up from the creek in a yelling headlong charge that seemed destined to engulf the little camp. Before her, facing the attack, Jess Evans crouched above two spouting, deadly guns. The onslaught swerved just short of him and became an endless circle of yelling painted braves. Evans turned then, a little pale but grinning. He saw Kathie and came to her.

"That was close!" he said. "Yuh seldom see 'em charge like that! They won't again."

She glanced past him to where three warriors sprawled in mute tribute to Evans' skill with guns. "Where are the others? Bob and—The Kid—and Uncle Joe?"

He laughed. "Billy was on the picket line. A couple o' bucks sneaked in t' cut the horses loose and Billy dropped 'em both. That's what made 'em charge, I reckon. I wasn't what yuh'd call alone just now, either. I heard Billy's sixes talkin',

slingin' lead past me, just before them Indians turned . . . Look! Yonder's Billy now!"

She leaned further past the wagon-top. Yonder, midway between the wagons and the circling braves, a slender figure darted in and out among the rearing maddened horses on the picket line. He turned toward the wagons as she looked, a dozen picket ropes twisted together in one hand. The horses surged after him as he turned and ran, laughing, toward the camp.

She saw him stagger suddenly and go down. The horses swept over him, rearing. Evans swore suddenly and began to run. Somehow, unwittingly, Kathie was running too, close at Evans' heels. She saw him swerve suddenly and catch up the dangling ropes as the horses milled about him; heard him laugh.

She saw The Kid scramble up, still laughing, dirty and disheveled but unhurt. And suddenly she was in his arms, held lightly as he trotted back toward the wagons in the wake of Evans and the teams.

"You came out to help me!" His voice was filled with a wondering, almost unbelieving happiness. "Why, bless your heart!"

Bob Haskel met them then and took her in his arms almost roughly. "Kathie, are you all right? Kathie, you little fool! You're all right ain't you, sis? What made you run out there like that?"

"I saw him—fall—and the horses came over him, and I was afraid—"

Bonney laughed. "They shot the heel off my boot, and I tripped and fell. Horses never step on you if they can help it, though." He smiled at her, and his eyes were warm, appreciative. "I'm thankin' you," he said simply. "I won't forget your comin' out to help me!"

Then with a rattling crash, hell seemed to break loose all around. All Kathie was aware of for a long time was the yells and shots of the Indians, and the quick crashing reply of the defenders' guns.

CHAPTER III

Cattle King

JOHN Chisum was a cattle king. From the top of his great rambling one-story adobe house at South Spring Ranch he could cast his eyes north, south, east or west and say, "All this is mine!" His

range alone was larger than some Eastern states. More cattle wore his brand than had ever been the property of any other one man.

In spite of that John Chisum was a simple man. He dressed as did the lowliest rider in his hire. A broad-rimmed hat, a flannel shirt, dark trousers tucked into well-worn boots, sometimes a vest. Chisum went unarmed, yet no man ever doubted his courage. Some men left off the wearing of guns in order to dodge personal responsibility. Chisum wore none because he needed none even in that lawless lousy land.

With his brothers Pitzer and James, and James' daughter Sally, Chisum had built for himself an empire that took in nearly half of all New Mexico. Indians raided his herds from their mountain fastnesses; Mexican outlaws swept up on Chisum cattle from below the Rio Grande; white rustlers grew fat on Chisum's plenty. But still his herds increased and still he rode undaunted.

But not unangered!

Standing there on the broad veranda that fall morning, Chisum's rage at Murphy was worthy of a king. As he watched the white-topped wagons creeping up from the south and the lone rider pounding in advance, Chisum's square-jawed face was dark as a thundercap.

But his frown became a welcoming smile as the oncoming rider clattered to a halt in the yard. Chisum stepped down, his hand outstretched.

"Billy, by the Eternal! Kid, I was just wishing you'd ride in—and here you are!" He halted suddenly, frowning. "Why, what's the matter, boy? You're limpin'!"

"Nothin' the matter, sir. Just got the heel shot off my boot, that's all."

Chisum chuckled. "Your heel, eh? Well, now! That's the first time I ever heard o' you turnin' your back on trouble, Kid!"

Billy grinned briefly. "We had a little brush with Indians three days ago down on Pinon Creek."

"The hell you say!"

Billy nodded. He told of the raid. "Haskel claimed he knew you, sir."

"Bob Haskel? You bet I know him! Fine boy he is, too! Those his wagons comin' there?"

"His wagons, yes." The Kid's face was grimly set. "You see, sir, Haskel stopped a 'Pache slug right soon after the fight be-

gan . . . We buried him down there on Pinon Creek; him and the littlest of the three Wilder kids."

"Good God! . . . How about the girl, Billy? Haskel's sister? She wasn't hurt, was she?"

"No. I brought her here, Chisum. I didn't know what else to do."

"You did just right, of course. Sally'll take care o' her . . . A fine, tragic welcome New Mexico is givin' her, eh, Billy?"

"She's been awful brave, sir. She and the Wilder woman loaded guns for us."

Chisum nodded. "Must've been pretty sharp while it lasted, eh?" he said.

"Pretty sharp. They kept circlin' all that day. They'd have finished us if they hadn't run short of lead. They was usin' bows and arrows toward the last."

Chisum growled an oath. "Bunch of young bucks, I reckon, crazy for horses and scalps. Lucky you was there, Billy . . . You go down and meet 'em, Kid. I'll go tell Sally to make things ready for 'em."

KATHLEEN Haskel greeted Billy with a wan, thin smile as the wagons halted in the yard.

"What a beautiful place!" she said softly.

Billy fell into step beside her, walking up toward the house. Flack and the Wilders followed them, making a small procession.

John Chisum welcomed them with that fine grave courtesy that made his Southern hospitality an art and Miss Sally, beside him, made her guests comfortable. Kathie's stoic calmness broke and she stumbled forward, blinded by a sudden gush of tears, into Sally Chisum's arms. They disappeared inside the house, leaving three solemn men outside.

Jesse Evans fumbled for tobacco, scowling as he made his smoke. The Kid's eyes were moist and he avoided Chisum's gaze.

"This country is hard on women," Chisum said. "Sit down, boys. There's a job for you here, Billy, if you want it. One for you, too, Evans, if you're Billy's friend."

A Mexican woman came outside bearing a tray, and Chisum poured out generous drinks. "Now we can talk," he said. "Here's how, boys! And happy days!"

Evans drained his glass. The Kid lifted his in answer to Chisum's toast but set it

down again untasted. Evans shrugged nervously, still frowning, oddly ill at ease.

"Reckon I'll find a bunk and sleep awhile," he said gruffly. He stepped down from the veranda, avoiding Billy's gaze.

The Kid stepped forward quickly, touching Evans' arm. "Better stay, Jess," he said softly.

John Chisum had the feeling that there was an odd finality in the little scene.

But Evans shook his head and turned away. "No use, Billy."

The Kid stared after Evans. He shrugged at last and smiled a little crookedly. "Well, sir?"

"There's bad trouble brewin' in Lincoln, Kid. I'm afraid it won't end short of war."

Billy shaped his smoke with painstaking care before he answered. "What did you think I came here for?" His smile was an enigma.

Chisum leaned forward suddenly, his eyes narrowing to slits.

"You ain't lined up in this business here?"

Billy shook his head. "You're the first man I've seen," he said. "You're the man I came to see, if you want to know."

Chisum's sigh of relief was unfeigned. "I'm glad of that! There's already been a lot of—Texas men—driftin' up from the south. Certain men are hirin' 'em. I just thought maybe you—"

The Kid cut in half-angrily. "I'm just a Texas warrior like the rest of 'em, maybe, but I don't sell my guns against my friends, Chisum! I'll thank you to remember that!"

Chisum's apology was instant and sincere. "Sorry, Billy. I should've known that, sure . . . And what about your friend?"

Billy frowned. "Let's leave him out of this."

Chisum nodded. "I'm no hand," he said at last, "to squeal over the loss of a few measly head of stock. But when a man steals my markets by offerin' beef at prices I can't meet, and then steals my cattle to fill his contracts, he's addin' insult to injury!"

Billy smiled a little. "The man's name is Murphy, isn't it? Go on from there."

"Major L. G. Murphy is the man I'm talkin' about and I'll say nothin' I haven't said, or wouldn't say, to his face! . . . Murphy was run out of Fort Stanton by the military authorities and came to Lin-

coln to open a store with John Riley and James Dolan. Murphy is the brains, Riley is the spy, Dolan is the fightin' man. They're hard to beat. Right now Murphy owns a ranch, the bank in Lincoln and the hotel there, besides the store."

"This Murphy seems to be a real smart man!"

Chisum glared. "Worst of all, he runs Lincoln County politics. Sheriff James A. Brady owes his job to Murphy. I catch Murphy's rustlers at work and make Brady arrest 'em. Murphy slips Brady the wink and Brady turns 'em loose! Oh, they kick the jail door down and escape, or Murphy's cowboys stage a jail-break; but it amounts to the same damn thing!"

THE Kid flipped his cigaret away, still chuckling. "That's playin' 'em both ways from the jack."

"One bet he overlooked!" Chisum answered curtly. "That was Alexander A. McSween!"

"Now we'll hear about the piano!" Billy laughed.

"Never mind the piano!" Chisum frowned. "McSween and his wife hit Lincoln two years ago, and Murphy promptly retained McSween. McSween's a good lawyer, but—he's honest. He found out that Murphy was a crook and he quit. McSween's been my lawyer since that day."

The Kid was frowning slightly now. "I never cared so much for a turncoat," he said slowly. "This man McSween don't sound so good to me."

Chisum came instantly to his friend's defense. "McSween is—well, he's *good*, Billy; more like a preacher than a business man. He's a misfit in Lincoln just on that account! He's so damn good he can't even understand the crookedness he's up against!"

Bonney shrugged. "All right, I'll take your word for it. But I reckon he's in for trouble! Murphy sounds like a bad man to double-cross."

"Exactly! And when this Englishman Tunstall offers to go in with McSween and open up a store to compete with Murphy's, McSween jumps at it!" Chisum hesitated briefly, flushing unaccountably. "They've opened up a bank now, too. Well, I'm president of the bank myself!"

Billy chuckled again. "I was beginnin' to wonder where you figured in the deal," he said. "How about Frank Coe? I've

heard he had a place near here somewhere."

"Frank's on our side, of course. Got a place over on the Ruidoso River. He was askin' about you not long ago."

The Kid fingered his still-untasted glass, making wet circles on the table top. "You said awhile ago that somebody was hirin' Texas men. I can name some of them. Billy Morton, for one; and Frank Baker; and Buckshot Bill Roberts."

Chisum nodded. "All Murphy men, or said to be," he said.

The Kid hardly noticed the interruption. "Not friends of mine, exactly," he said slowly. "But they know me . . . Chisum, I reckon I won't take that job you spoke about, after all!"

He grinned as Chisum made a gesture of angry amazement. "Wait! I'd be ticketed right off as Chisum's official gun-fighter and those men would shy away from me unless they was huntin' open trouble. But—suppose I hit Lincoln on my own; ridin' the grub-line, so to speak. I could drop in on Frank Coe and spend the winter huntin'. I might learn more that way, and you'd know where I was!"

Chisum's square face broke into an understanding grin. "Billy, I'd be real glad to finance your huntin' trip at top wages!"

Bonney shook his head. "I've got money," he said. "I'm a real good gamblin' man, in case you didn't know! I'll tell you, though; if I should get pressed for cash I might rustle a few head of Long Rail cows! That might recommend me real favorably to certain folks!"

Chisum burst into hearty booming laughter. "Go to it, Kid! From now on you're the official Chisum rustler!"

"That's fair enough." The Kid's smile was boyish. "This'll be the first time I ever had a *permit* to steal!"

They laughed together then, and it was significant that neither man required a written word or witness to that incredible bargain.

Feminine voices reached them from inside the house, and Billy stiffened suddenly, newly thoughtful. "What about—Miss Haskel?"

"Both wagons and teams belonged to Haskel, didn't they?" Chisum asked. "What'd you say was a fair price for the whole outfit?"

Billy considered it for a moment. "Four hundred, roughly. Or maybe that's a little high."

"Suppose I offer her five hundred for the outfit?" Chisum suggested. "That'll give her a little nest-egg of her own; keep her from feelin' dependent, or anything. And I'll throw in a saddle horse. Sally won't hear of her leavin' here for a month or so, anyway."

Bonney was laughing softly when Chisum finished.

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Chisum demanded.

"Nothin', sir." There was a wayward gleam in Billy's eyes. "For a hard-hearted, tight-fisted business man, Chisum, you're the softest man I ever knew! . . . I'm thankin' you, that's all. It's what I'd like to do for her myself."

Chisum flushed painfully, like a boy caught in mischief. "Think a right smart of her, eh, Kid?"

Billy nodded. "Provin' that I'm somethin' of a fool!"

Chisum stood silent for a moment and his eyes were thoughtful. "Son, I reckon there's worse things in this world than notches on a gun!"

CHAPTER IV

The Gathering Storm

AND so that fall of 1877, Billy the Kid hunted wild turkey and deer and cinnamon bear. Sometimes with Frank Coe, more often with the Englishman, Tunstall, Billy explored the country until he was as much at home in it as any wolf. It was a pleasant season for The Kid, made pleasanter by his not infrequent trips to Lincoln and South Spring ranch.

It was on one of these trips early in December that he learned of Kathie's job. Riding down toward South Spring, Billy met the McSweens enroute from Chisum's ranch to Lincoln in a buckboard.

McSween halted his team and shouted a greeting. "Hello, Billy! They tell me Tunstall finally got a bear!"

Billy drew rein beside the buckboard, bareheaded and smiling. "Howdy, sir. Howdy, Mrs. McSween. Yes, Tunstall got his bear, all right. Tunstall ain't what you'd call a dead shot. It was a question for awhile whether he'd get the bear or the bear'd get him—but Tunstall won!"

McSween nodded. "Good stuff in the man, eh, Billy?"

"Tunstall's got nerve." The Kid's praise

in matters relating to courage was not easily won.

Mrs. McSween leaned forward, her eyes mischievous. "You're on your way to South Spring, I suppose? Kathie was asking about you! You know she's been undecided about going back to California?"

Billy's eyes were suddenly sober. "Yes, ma'am. Has she—made up her mind?"

Mrs. McSween laughed. "Yes, she's made up her mind, Billy. To stay! Beginning with the New Year she's coming in to make her home with us and open a school for Lincoln's little folks. That pleases you, I hope?"

Billy nodded, his eyes bright. "Yes, ma'am. I'll say it does!" Then he flushed, and his eyes met McSween's steadily. "I'm glad—but I shouldn't be. My friendship ain't a thing that'll help—a girl like her. I reckon you—know that."

McSween reached out to lay a hand on Billy's knee beside the saddle horn. "Few men," he said, "ever go so deep in sin that there is no salvation, son. You're much too young—and much too fine, I think—to have gone that far. There's a welcome for you in my house, lad."

"Why . . . Why, thank you, sir!" McSween's words, or the tone of them, left Billy speechless.

Alexander McSween was the living exponent of a creed The Kid had never seen applied before and could barely understand: the creed of The Golden Rule and the Gospel of "God so loved the world."

But in these short months of contact Billy had come to admire the man and to respect him and his creed. It was not, he thought, a very workable creed—not, at least, in this time and place—but it was a creed not to be despised, at any rate.

He sat silent now, his hat off as the buckboard rolled away. Then he turned his horse's head toward Chisum's.

"I reckon I've been over-estimatin' myself a heap," he told himself. "I've been sort of pridin' myself on bein' a bad, tough hombre; couldn't get the idea out o' my head even when it hurt! Chisum told me not to be a bigger fool than I had to be; Tunstall seems to think it's all right for me to like Kathie; and now McSween the same as gives me his blessing. Chisum's practical; Tunstall's long on etiquette; McSween's a pious man. If a thing is good commonsense, and good manners, and good morals—it must be just about all right! . . . Come on, pony! Shake a leg!"

JOHN CHISUM met him at the end of the double row of cottonwoods leading in toward the house. Chisum was deeply agitated over recent news:

"Did you know that before Murphy came to Lincoln he ran a butler's store in Fort Stanton in partnership with a man named Fritz? Well, Fritz went back to Germany awhile ago and died there. Before he left he turned his will and an insurance policy for ten thousand dollars over to Murphy. Now, Murphy refuses to turn over either the will or the insurance policy, claimin' that Fritz owed him a big sum of money. So Fritz's heirs want McSween to handle the case—and I'm afraid it'll cause trouble. I told McSween so—told him it was dangerous—but he laughed at me!"

Billy nodded. "McSween would do what he thought was right, regardless. Which means, I reckon, that he'll take the case . . . What will Murphy do?"

"God only knows!" Chisum's tone was grave. "Well, there's no use speculatin' about it. What's new with you?"

Billy shrugged. "Tunstall wants me to work for him. He really needs me, I reckon. You don't. And workin' for Tunstall would be a little different from linin' right up with you. People wouldn't think of it quite the same way."

"It's a good idea, Billy . . . You're gettin' real friendly with Tunstall and McSween, ain't you?"

"Tunstall's all wool and a yard wide, Billy said earnestly, "and McSween's as square as you said he was. I like them both."

Chisum chuckled. "I thought you'd see it that way, give you time."

So Billy heard the first deep rumblings from the black clouds of war that hung above the Pecos River range. For war impended certainly. McSween's store in Lincoln was prospering. Tunstall, on the Rio Feliz, was becoming an appreciable factor in the cattle business. The McSween-Tunstall-Chisum combination was making itself felt in banking fields. On the other hand Murphy and Murphy's friends were losing financially as well as politically.

Murphy was not the man to accept disasters such as these without a struggle. That he would fight, and fight hard and ruthlessly, no one doubted but McSween.

In Lincoln, less than a week after his visit to the Chisum ranch, Billy left a bulky package at McSween's. In answer to Mrs. McSween's questioning he flushed

a little. "Christmas is comin', Ma'am, and a man has got to prepare for it. You hide this for me and—don't let Kathie know."

She nodded wisely. "It's a big package, Billy," she commented, and would not explain her words. "I hear you're working for Mr. Tunstall now."

"Yes, ma'am . . . And, by the way! Kathie told me you were figurin' to give a party Christmas Eve and—she invited me. She said you asked her to."

"Indeed I did, Billy. And you'll be here, won't you?"

"I don't know how you'd keep me away, ma'am! I'd have to come for that package now, even if I wasn't asked to the party!"

In Murphy's bar Sheriff Brady greeted Billy with cordial friendliness. "I hear yuh been huntin' some with that English dude, eh, Kid? Yuh hear what happened t' him the last time he was in town?"

Billy shook his head. "What happened?"

"Well, John Riley stuck a burr under the dude's saddle and when Tunstall got on his horse there was a circus! That bronc piled Mr. Dude all over town! Tore his purty pants and mussed him up somethin' scandalous!"

Billy laughed politely. "What did Tunstall do?"

"What *could* he do? Just grinned sort o' foolish-like and said the joke was on him, and also the drinks. . . . There's Riley now. Hi, John! I was just tellin' Billy here the joke yuh played on his English friend!"

Riley laughed wickedly. "I always aim t' educate him some each time he comes t' town."

Billy nodded. "I was out to Chisum's place the other day," he said casually. "Seems like you're gettin' awful popular in some places I could name, Riley. Miss Sally was sayin' what a dancin' man you was. It seemed like she was right interested in you."

Riley ducked his head, smirking self-consciously. "Women get tired o' kid-foolishness in time. Then's when an older, more experienced man appeals to 'em!"

Billy let the matter drop, changing the subject with careless ease. But the wedge was in!

That night, over Tunstall's study table, he mentioned the matter casually. "I carried your message to Riley," he said.

Tunstall leaned forward. "And did he take the bait?"

"Seemed to. Nibbled at it, anyway."

Tunstall chuckled. "By George! Be rippin' if it works, eh?"

Billy was grave. "You sure you want to go ahead with it? Makin' a fool of Riley is about the same as slappin' Murphy's face, in a way of speakin'. Riley might decide to take a shot at you; or Murphy might."

Tunstall's eyes widened. "I don't see why! It's a custom of the country, isn't it? Practical joking, I mean. He's played enough on me . . . I say, I've got a letter ready for him, too. Think he'll suspect that it's not a woman's hand?"

Billy inspected the proffered sheet of neat small script and shook his head. "Riley ain't that smart."

Tunstall folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. "What's new in town?" he asked.

"McSween's away. Gone to Sante Fe about that Fritz insurance case."

"Oh! Then he's taken the case?"

"Yes. And it means trouble, Tunstall, as sure as you're born!"

Tunstall stared at the ceiling through narrowed eyes. "I'm afraid you're right. Still, what can Murphy do? McSween knows the law. The courts will uphold him."

Billy made an impatient gesture. "You and McSween don't seem to understand. Murphy won't leave it to the courts. He's not hirin' lawyers; he's hirin' guns!"

But Tunstall shook his head. Bloodshed over something like that could not happen in the English countryside with which he was familiar and so it could not happen here.

DECEMBER slid by uneventfully. In Sante Fe, Alexander McSween paid with his own money the bill for which the Fritz insurance policy stood as surety and then sent the policy in for collection.

December 24th arrived and the town of Lincoln bustled and buzzed in anticipation of the party at the McSween house. Tunstall and Billy rode in together, eager as children for the holiday. In the privacy of the livery barn Tunstall gave way to chuckling laughter.

"You don't suppose he's seen Sally, do you? Oh, I say! It'd be too bad if he found out that she was here in town!"

Billy grinned. "It ain't likely that he's seen her, since she came in after dark last night; and she's promised not to show herself today. Riley won't be visitin' McSween's, I reckon. You better calm down,

though, or he'll smell a rat when you give him the letter."

They moved out into the street together, toward the Murphy bar. The town was filled with people already and their progress was delayed by greetings and handshakings and friendly talk.

In the Murphy bar, Tunstall stood a round of drinks and was immediately the butt of friendly badinage. Sheriff Brady was there, and John Riley, and Chisum, and many more.

Tunstall set his glass down suddenly. "Oh, I say! I was about to forget! Riley, I've a note for you. . . . Where is that blasted letter now? Oh, here it is, Riley! It's from—" He paused, leaned forward, whispered a word in Riley's ear. The little man flushed vividly and took the letter, breaking away from the crowd to read it in private.

The letter read, Riley swaggered back to join the crowd at the bar, bursting with renewed importance. "Much obliged t' you, Tunstall. I reckon some o' these rough-necks'll open up their eyes some when they see the company I'll be in tonight, eh? I'm sure 'obliged t' you!"

By noon, all Lincoln was aware of something in the wind. Word came that John Riley had bought a brand new pair of boots; had "bought ever'thing the barber had; shave, haircut, and bay-rum."

Resplendent in new suit and boots and barbered hair, Riley drove out of town in a hired buggy behind a spanking team of shining bays. Certain of the wise ones in the town guessed that something was up and eyed Tunstall with suspicious eyes. Billy, weary of much questioning, fled to the McSween house for sanctuary.

Kathie was there, and so was Miss Sally Chisum, both girls busy with the task of "fixing up" the room that was to be Kathie's home. Billy joined them, helping here and there, happy in the pleasant unfamiliar atmosphere of a home. Sally pulled him aside once to whisper in his ear.

"Did it work?"

He nodded, smiling. Kathie parted them with feigned indignation and flushed deeply over Sally's prompt charge of jealousy.

The Kid tip-toed away in a little while, to find Mrs. McSween at her piano.

"I'd like to get that package now, ma'am," he said.

"But Billy! It isn't time for gifts yet! Can't you wait?"

He shook his head. A little later he

returned to the girls, heavily burdened, and placed his bundle on the bed. "It's for you, Kathie. I aimed it for a Christmas gift but it seems like it might fit in best now, while you're fixin' up your room."

She bent over the bulky package, making little delighted sounds. The wrappings fell away. "Billy! It's a rug! A gorgeous bearskin rug!"

He nodded, embarrassed. "It was a specially big bear," he said inanely. "I thought you might like it."

"It's lovely!" She came toward him, bright-eyed and smiling. "But the nicest part of it is your remembering me." She reached up suddenly.

Billy had a quick, dazed glimpse of Sally Chisum's laughing face as she slipped past them toward the door. He felt Kathie's kiss upon his cheek. Then he caught her in his arms, crushing her to him in a hungry grip.

"Kathie! Kathie, sweet. . . ."

She made no struggle, resting in his arms in a sweet surrender unmarred by coquetry or sham. He held her so for a little while, his heart pounding. "I—I love you!" he whispered. "I didn't mean to tell you now—so soon; but I couldn't help myself!"

She lifted her face to his. "I love you, too, Billy," she said, very softly. "I've loved you ever since that day you came to us, down there on Pinon Creek."

He kissed her lightly, reverently. But her arms tightened about his neck, pulling his mouth down to hers again. It was a long time before they spoke again.

CHAPTER V

A Dangerous Joke

THE great U-shaped McSween adobe hummed with gay festivities that Christmas Eve. Candles burned in every window and through the doors marched a steady stream of incoming guests.

John Chisum, wealthiest man in the New Mexico Territory, was there. And there were chuck-line riders there without a dime. Sheriff James A. Brady was there. There, too, were men wanted by the law for crimes entailing theft and sudden death. Tunstall, scion of British aristocracy, hooked one arm affectionately across the shoulders of the deadliest gunman in the whole Southwest: young William Bonney—Billy the Kid.

And mingling with them, one of them, was McSween, gaunt and tall in ministerial black, a man who carried a Bible among men who carried guns; a man too gentle to foresee the tide of blood and hatred surging up to swallow him.

Through the swelling clamor the clear notes of a piano rose compellingly and the voices died to a murmur and then were still. The crowd around the instrument fell back a little. Beside Mrs. McSween at the piano Kathleen Haskell began to sing.

*Silent night,
Holy night,
All is calm—
All is bright . . .*

The stately phrases soared as the girl's voice found confidence and volume, filling the room with melody. Something inside The Kid made him suddenly catch his breath.

A little sigh swept through the crowded room as the song ended. McSween stepped forward, a worn Bible open in his hands. In reverent attitude he read the passage announcing "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord," and ending with "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men."

There was a moment of hushed silence. Tunstall's whisper barely reached Billy's ear. "Peace on earth, good will to men. And he believes it, too! That's the miracle! McSween believes it still applies!"

The piano struck up a livelier tune and the reverent hush was broken. Someone called Tunstall away. Billy moved through the crowd in search of Kathie. A door burst open just ahead of him and he halted, rigid with the foreknowledge of impending drama.

John Riley stood before him, no longer immaculate, sweating, tousled, his eyes ablaze.

"Where's Tunstall?"

McSween held out his hand in greeting, but Riley struck it aside. Then The Kid spoke up quietly. "Tunstall's here somewhere, Riley. What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Riley crumpled a sheet of paper in his fist and brandished it furiously. "Forgery, that's what it is! I'll have the law on him! I'll kill the dirty—"

The Kid's hand shot out, gripping Ri-

ley's shoulder. "Steady, man!" he said. The curses died on Riley's lips.

McSween took the letter out of Riley's hand.

"Read it out loud, McSween!" said The Kid curtly.

Something in Billy's rigid attitude required obedience. McSween's puzzled voice dominated the silence as he read:

"Dear Mr. Riley:

Uncle John is riding to Lincoln instead of driving as I had expected, and is leaving early. It is bold of me, I know; but I wondered if you'd like to come for me this afternoon? Riding horseback with Uncle John, and in a party gown, would be so awkward; and anyway I'd like to talk with you."

McSween glanced up, plainly bewildered. "It's signed 'Sally C'." he said.

Back in the crowd somewhere a man's voice lifted in a wolf-like yelp of laughter. It spread like a plague, gaining volume. "And Riley bit!" someone cried. "Actually thought Miss Sally had asked him to come for her!"

Back of Riley a tall figure filled the doorway and Tunstall's drawling voice sounded.

"Ah, there you are, Riley! We've been expectin' you, y' know. Nice ride down to Chisum's, what?"

Riley turned swiftly, his lips drawn back across his teeth. "Tunstall, by God, I'll—"

Tunstall smiled friendly. "You had your joke; I've had mine," he said. "Shall we call it quits now and shake hands?"

Riley drew back. A voice from the crowd followed Tunstall's and it was filled with an unholy mirth: "... all dressed up in brand-new duds, all the way out to Chisum's and back, *alone!*" Laughter swelled up again in a mighty wave of sound. Riley's face purpled with fury. His lips drawn back, he cursed Tunstall murderously, vilely. The laughter hushed. Tunstall's face turned slowly white.

McSween's big hand fell heavily on Riley's shoulder. "Silence!" McSween's voice, usually so gentle, was a roar. "No man can speak so in my house, sir! Nor to my guest!"

Riley jerked free, his right hand darting back toward his hip. The Kid's left hand clutched Riley's coat at the collar, sucking it down until it pinned Riley's arms as in a vise. The Kid's right hand found Riley's wrist and pinned it in a rigid grip. A

snub-nosed gun struck Billy's boot as it fell from Riley's hand, and Billy spun his captive around to face the door.

"You've had your laughs, Riley," he said. "This time the laugh's on you! Get out! And the next time you reach for a gun in front of me, *you make it fast!*"

He lifted one trim, polished boot, planting it in Riley's back. His knee straightened suddenly and Riley catapulted through the door, a human battering ram.

Billy turned slowly, brushing his hands against his coat. There was a black rectangle on the floor where Riley had stood and he covered it with his boot, hardly conscious of the reason why he did.

Tunstall was speaking to McSween apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir. It was a foolish joke, but I had no idea the man would take it as he did."

McSween laid a hand on Tunstall's arm. "It's all right, my friend. There's no harm done."

THE following laughter broke the tension Riley's call had left. Men crowded around Tunstall, eager to shake his hand and slap him on the back. Practical joking was an institution in the land—and Tunstall not only had taken his own medicine and grinned, but had given back better than he took.

Amid the bustle of those congratulations Billy quietly picked up the object he had covered with his boot. It was a small, black notebook and he ruffled the leaves in his fingers. They were black with entries and he tucked the thing away in his pocket to await a more thorough inspection.

A violin struck up a rowdy rhythm and the floor cleared slowly, making way for the dancers. Billy reached Kathie in the van of a rush of men and she gave him her hands, laughing. But while they waited for the floor to clear, her voice whispered in his ear anxiously.

"Riley was terribly angry, wasn't he? I believe he'd have done something desperate if you hadn't caught his arm. You don't suppose he'll try to—to get even with Mr. Tunstall, do you?"

Billy shrugged. "He'll calm down." Then he bent over her, forgetting Riley for the moment. "You're always beautiful, but tonight—you're like an angel! I'll never forget the way you sang."

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "It's

because I'm so happy, Billy. Why, I even forgot I had a gift for you! But I have."

The dance claimed them then, sweeping them away on the general tide of gaiety.

Someone else claimed Kathie for the next dance, and Billy for the first time had the opportunity to examine the notebook he had found. Five minutes later he tapped Tunstall on the shoulder.

"Get Chisum and bring him to McSween's office in the other wing of the house," he whispered. "I'll get McSween and meet you there."

Tunstall opened his mouth—and then shut it. "Right!" he said.

When the four of them were gathered in the little office, Billy tossed the notebook onto McSween's desk.

"That fell out of Riley's coat awhile ago," he said. "I figured you-all might want a look at it."

Chisum picked up the book and opened it. McSween and Tunstall closed in beside him, peering over Chisum's shoulder. Chisum leafed through the book, frowning. An entry caught his eye and he read it aloud.

"'Billy Morton,

26 head @ \$5.00.....	\$130.00
8 head @ \$5.00.....	40.00
12 head @ \$5.00.....	60.00'

What is this, Billy? Just some personal accounts, ain't it? What's on your mind?"

Billy shrugged. "There are twenty-odd pages of entries like that, each page headed with a man's name. I don't know *all* the men named there, but the ones I do know are rustlers! Who else but rustlers would be deliverin' cattle at five bucks a head, anyway? . . . I reckon that little book explains how Murphy can underbid you on beef contracts, eh, Chisum?"

Chisum stared. "But this is Riley's book, you said! What's Murphy got to do with it?"

"Riley is Murphy's right-hand man, ain't he? The entries in that book total away up in the thousands! Riley's never had the capital to deal on a scale like that. That's a record of Murphy's purchases of stolen stock, *sabe Usted?*"

Chisum frowned. "What do you think, McSween?"

"I haven't a doubt that Billy is right." McSween's assurance was convincing, even to Chisum.

"Then we've got him!" Chisum's voice rang out triumphantly. "With this as evidence we can put Murphy where he belongs!"

But McSween shook his head. "We're convinced, but whether the evidence there would convince a jury—that's another thing. Certainly not one made up of Murphy's friends, instructed by a judge partisan to Murphy. No, I'm afraid we'd need more evidence than that."

"Then we'll get more!" Chisum shut the notebook and brought his hand down upon it for emphasis. "McSween, you hold on to this book! What other evidence we get we'll bring to you. When you say we've got enough to be sure, I'll bring the charges! I'll see Murphy behind the bars if it's the last thing I do on earth!"

Billy watched thoughtfully as the little notebook changed hands. "That's a dangerous thing for a man to have, Mr. McSween," he said. "Especially a man who carries a Bible in his saddle bags instead of a gun! Carryin' a Bible is all right, but—I wish you'd pack a gun, too."

McSween smiled. "No, son. A gun would be a useless thing in my hands. I'll stick to the Bible, Billy. It's a familiar friend to me; an ever-present help in time of trouble."

"It won't stop bullets, though." Billy's voice was sincerely troubled. "It won't protect you from Murphy's killers!"

"Perhaps not from death. But it shields me from the *fear* of death, because I've learned from it that bullets cannot kill the soul. No, you mustn't worry about me. I've dealt honestly and openly with every man. No man has cause to hate me or wish me ill."

THE conference ended there and the four men returned to the crowd. Billy paused at a doorway leading out into the open court; stepped outside and rolled a cigaret. The stars overhead were bright points of chilled light in a steely sky. A scudding moon slid in and out of windy clouds. Inside the house the fiddles sang.

This was a night he would never forget, he knew. "*Silent night, Holy night, All is calm—All is bright . . .*" He was eighteen now; old enough to settle down. He had had his fling. Here, for the first time in his life, he had found solid friends; good men—Chisum, Tunstall, Frank Coe, McSween—whose friendship bore weight.

Those men were building an empire here and he could help them build.

He might, with Chisum's aid, buy an interest in Tunstall's ranch. That would be pleasant, being partners with Tunstall. Opposite as the poles in everything, they had still found common ground on which to base a friendship that was deep and enduring. If Tunstall made a go of it with Miss Sally Chisum, they could build their houses on neighboring hills and play together, the four of them, while they prospered.

A door clicked behind him, and Billy turned. The moonlight fell on Kathie's flushed face. She slipped into his arms again, laughing breathlessly.

"I've been looking everywhere for you! Then I met Tunstall and he smiled and pointed out here . . . Oh, Billy, it must be wicked to be so happy! But I can't help it tonight. It's all so new and wonderful!"

He held her tightly, his lips against her hair. "I was dreamin' of you—of us, I mean—and then I turned and there you were!"

"Tell me your dream?"

He told her, fumbling a little for the words to voice his thoughts. "I've never had a reason for workin' till now, but—I'll surprise you! Lord, how I'll work, Kathie! I've got some money put away, and nearly a thousand comin' to me from loans and other debts. Soon as I collect that I'll ask Tunstall about goin' in with him. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I'd love it. Please hurry, Billy! . . . No, I take that back. I want you to take time enough to be very sure of things. I'll wait; and here's something to convince you." She caught his hand and bent over it, sliding a ring upon his finger.

"It was my mother's gift to my father, Billy. It fits you perfectly. That's an omen, I think! . . . The emerald swings back like a locket and there's a picture under it. It's her picture; my mother's. But it's so much like me that you'd never guess unless you knew."

From inside the house McSween's voice came out to them, stilling the other sounds. "My friends," he said, "some of you have long journeys home and it is late. Some are ready now to leave. Before they go I'd like to have you gather 'round and sing with us. It's Christmas morning! Let us make a joyful noise unto the Lord!"

The piano sounded then, a bar or two of sweet, familiar music. McSween's voice led off, strong and filled with an abiding faith. Other voices joined with his until the anthem rang out full and clear and beautiful:

"God be with you till we meet again;
By his counsels guide, uphold you,
With his sheep securely fold you,
God be with you till we meet again."

Kathie stirred in Billy's arms and turned her face to his. He kissed her, long and lingeringly.

CHAPTER VI

The Murder

UNCLE Joe Flack stepped out from a group of men in front of the McSween house to call Billy's name as Billy and Tunstall took their leave. Beside Flack a tall young man in faded work-worn gear swung about to face the two approaching men.

"Here's a man yuh ought t' know, Billy." Uncle Joe tipped his head far back to glance up at the towering man beside him. "Pat Garrett is his name; cow-puncher for Pete Maxwell, up t' Fort Sumner. He's another Texas man."

They stood for a moment measuring each other. Garrett was a giant of a man, a trifle over six feet four inches tall and broad accordingly. Beside The Kid's scant five-feet-eight he seemed immense. The man's clothes were old and worn but they were very clean; and the Irish eyes met Billy's gaze unflinchingly.

"I'm from Texas, all right," Garrett said slowly. "But I'm not a 'Texas man'; not the way the name is used up here."

There was an instant hush. "Texas man," in the vernacular, meant gun-fighting man; and sometimes, depending upon the manner of its use, it carried a distinct opprobrium.

Billy stiffened slightly, staring into Garrett's eyes. He grinned quickly and put out his hand. "I'm glad to meet you, Garrett," he said. "I hope you show these folks up here that Texas men ain't all as bad as they make out!"

Garrett's big hand engulfed The Kid's and Uncle Joe heaved a sigh of real relief.

"Garrett's fell hard fer the country up

Fort Sumner way," he said. "Claims he aims t' stay."

Billy nodded, and turned to Tunstall. "Time we was gettin' home. So long, men. I reckon I'll be seein' you, Garrett. . . . *Adios!*"

He fell in beside Tunstall and they walked together down the street toward the stable where their mounts awaited them. Presently Tunstall spoke as they rode through the night.

"I saw your friend, Evans, in the saloon this afternoon. He asked for you; said he'd see you tonight after the party."

"Missin' me won't break his heart, I reckon," Billy said. "I'd rather ride on home. Jess has ideas about some things that don't just jibe with mine."

Tunstall knew Evans was making a precarious living with cards and cows. If he had had no part in the rustling of Chisum's cows at least he was running with the men who did.

"Queer duck, that Garrett chap," Tunstall said, changing the subject casually. "Huge, eh? What did you make of him?"

"I like him," Billy said simply.

Tunstall glanced at him curiously. "Now, why?"

"I don't know, exactly. He's got a steady pair of eyes, for one thing. . . . And he's got nerve. You heard what he said about not bein' a Texas man? It took nerve for him to say that—to me."

Tunstall chuckled softly. "Nerve? Why, he's twice your size!"

"Size?" Billy made a deprecating gesture with his hands. "There's a sayin' out here, Tunstall, that while God was makin' big men and little men Old Mister Colt was makin' eveners! You see, I've got a reputation for bein' rapid with a gun. Some men would kill me if they could, just to get the fame of downin' me. . . . But I knew the minute I laid eyes on him that he wasn't out to kill me."

Tunstall frowned. "I don't see how," he said.

"No man except a gun-fighter or a fool would try to down me when I was facin' him. That sounds like braggin', maybe, but—it's true. . . . Garrett don't look much like a fool, and he ain't a gunman. His guns don't hang just right for that."

They rode out beyond the last scattered lights of Lincoln into a night lighted only by the stars. Tunstall glanced sideways at The Kid. Billy's chin was up, head proud-

ly held, and he was smiling as he rode. But it was not until the moon slid out from underneath a scudding cloud to strike green fire from the stone on Billy's finger that Tunstall spoke again.

"I say, Billy! Something new, what? That ring, I mean. Kathie's gift, of course?"

Billy nodded. "I'm the happiest man on earth tonight," he said.

Tunstall swung in toward him. "You mean, you and Kathie? By gad, Billy, I'm glad, you know! Congratulations—all that sort of rot! Let me stand up with you, what? Best man, you know. Make me happier than anything I know!"

"You're on, Tunstall, of course. But—why not make it a double wedding?"

Tunstall flushed. "You mean with Miss Sally? Corkin' idea, of course. Like to, and all that. Just can't get up my nerve, though, it seems." He shook his head. "That reminds me! I've a gift for you, too, Billy. That Mannlicher-Schoenauer carbine with the special sights. No chance to buy anything, really, so I've fallen back on second-hand gifts."

Billy stared, then shook his head, emphatically. "No, sir! Why, that rifle cost you a young fortune, Tunstall! Special workmanship—special sights. Thanks just the same, but I couldn't—"

"There's four other rifles in my gun-case, as you know. One is the same as another, to me. Different with you; an expert should be supplied with proper tools! That Mannlicher is yours and there's an end to it! No argument!"

Billy put out his hand and gripped Tunstall's arm. "Nothin' you could possibly give me would please me more, and you knew that!"

SIX weeks slid by, each climaxed by a Sunday at McSween's. Kathie's school in Lincoln was thriving beyond her hopes. McSween moved placidly about his own affairs, serene and calm. But the fuse to the powder keg that was to hurl bloody chaos over all the Pecos River range was set. It needed only a spark to set it off.

McSween's action in depositing the Fritz insurance under his own name after paying Murphy's debt was that spark. There was a conference in a room back of Murphy's bar on the night of February 12th. Sheriff James A. Brady was there with Billy Morton, newly sworn in as his deputy. James Dolan was present, and

John Riley, Murphy's partners in the store. Murphy himself was the last to arrive, his face like a frozen mask.

"This is a council of war," he said without preamble. Each word had the clipped crispness that comes of years of military command.

"Certain men have combined against me here and the time has come to strike. My interests are your interests. If any man doubts that, now is the time for him to declare himself. Dolan, you and Riley are bound to me by business ties. They have been profitable. Brady, you are in debt to me for your position as Sheriff. It is a lucrative one. As for you, Morton, I stand between you and that Texas jail! . . . I make my meaning clear, I hope? If I go down, so do all of you!"

It was Brady who answered him. "That's true, Major. None of us will let you down."

"Good! . . . McSween is a clever man, but at last he's made a mistake. He has deposited the Fritz insurance money under his own name in a St Louis bank. I have a claim against the Fritz estate. I propose to enforce that claim now by action against McSween as receiver of the estate. I have sworn out an attachment against the McSween-Tunstall store and I have also sworn out an attachment against Tunstall's property on the Rio Feliz!"

A frown appeared on Brady's face. "Listen, Major! Tunstall's a partner in the store, but McSween *ain't* a partner in the ranch! You can attach McSween's property, but you can't attach Tunstall's! You've got no right—"

"I have the right of might, Brady! And in time of war, might *is* right! Tomorrow, Brady, you or your deputy will serve an attachment against the Tunstall property."

"But, Major, it won't work! All Tunstall's got to do is to go to court and prove personal ownership of the property, and the attachment will be set aside!"

Murphy looked at him grimly. "Listen! Tunstall must never bring that attachment to court! Both Tunstall and McSween must—go! Do you understand? They both must *go*!"

Brady shivered with the comprehension of those grim words. "But—there'd still be Chisum."

"Chisum is a cattle man," Murphy smiled sardonically. "Let Chisum raise 'em; we'll market 'em! That's the way it

was before; that's the way it's got to be again!"

So Murphy planned.

MEANWHILE, on the Rio Feliz, Tunstall had declared a holiday. The morning of February 13th dawned clear and warm. Three of his men went hunting. Dick Brewer, Tunstall's foreman, and Billy the Kid elected to go to town. Tunstall rode with them.

Some distance on the road Tunstall suddenly pulled up sharply. He pointed ahead. "Look—turkeys!"

A flock of wild turkeys crossed the trail two hundred yards ahead. Brewer ripped his rifle from its sheath, jerking it up for a hasty shot. He missed and Billy laughed. The Kid's revolver flashed in the sunlight as he whipped it up.

"I can use a Colt and beat that, Dick!" he boasted. The gun barked and the slug kicked dust between two turkey hens. The turkeys flew, scudding low toward the hills.

Tunstall exclaimed in disappointment. "Fine pair of hunters, you two! If we had one of those hens now, there might be an excuse for dropping in on the McSweens for supper!"

Billy and Dick Brewer exchanged glances. "Come on, Dick!" said Billy. "Let's get us a turkey and call his bluff!"

Tunstall laughed and waved them on. "You boys ride ahead," he said. "I didn't bring a gun, so I'll keep to the trail and meet you further on."

They were quickly out of sight in a little while and Tunstall rode on slowly, smiling to himself. They were good boys, he thought. Wild, hot-blooded, perhaps—but square.

Hoofs pounding on the trail behind him made him turn. A score of men, riding close together, bore down toward him. Tunstall halted to wait for them. As they drew nearer he recognized a few of them: young Billy Morton, Frank Baker, Tom Hill, Billy Matthews. . . . There were several Mexicans, as well. Tunstall greeted them as they pulled their horses to a plunging halt.

"I say! Charge of the light brigade, what? Hello, Morton! What's up, eh?"

His answer was a rifle shot.

Tunstall twisted in the saddle, a look of dazed astonishment upon his pleasant face. His mount plunged aside and Tunstall fell heavily, clutching at his heart. Another

shot rang out and Tunstall's horse came down, a bullet in his brain. A man dismounted, staggering, and jammed his rifle muzzle tight against Tunstall's head. He pulled the trigger and reeled back drunkenly, yelling. The posse took up the cry, baying like blood-thirsty beasts above the kill.

They made an orgy of it, folding Tunstall's coat to make a pillow for the head of the slaughtered horse, and then pillowed Tunstall's shattered head upon his hat. It was grisly humor, horrible and meaningless.

When it was done they mounted and wheeled their horses past the bodies on the trail, yelling and firing off their guns in a farewell salute. They straightened into the Lincoln trail finally at a wild gallop, heading back to Murphy's bar to replenish their supply of liquid bravery.

CHAPTER VII

Council of War

THE slapping echoes of rifle fire ended the hunt on which Dick Brewer and The Kid had gone. They whirled together, riding swiftly back to the crest of a high hill. The Lincoln posse was already in headlong flight.

"They've killed Tunstall!"

The Kid spat out an oath and spurred his horse. They came down out of the hills at reckless speed, crashing through the underbrush and leaping dry arroyo beds. Both horses were blown when they reined up beside the trail.

Billy glanced once at the bloody thing there on the ground and turned away, pale with agony. When he spoke at last it was to vent a flood of fierce profanity that made Dick Brewer stare. In a land where swearing was a part of daily speech The Kid seldom used an oath. Brewer put an arm over Billy's shoulders.

"Steady, Kid," he said. "It's hell, I know. . . . If only we hadn't left him alone!"

A shuddering sob shook Billy's slender body once and he jerked his head erect.

"You stay here, Dick. I'll ride to town."

Brewer gripped Billy's arm. "Don't go to Brady! Find McSween; tell him what's happened and let him decide."

Billy nodded. "McSween'll know what's best."

He turned his mount, heading northward in the wake of Tunstall's murderers. Dry-eyed, he was torn by the deepest agony his soul had ever known. Tunstall, best of friends, guileless of wrong, murdered in cold blood like a mad pariah dog!

The Kid forgot even to knock at McSween's.

"Tunstall . . . is dead," he said, rushing in. "Murdered . . . on the trail to town."

McSween sprang forward, catching Billy in his arms. "Tunstall? God in heaven, Billy! Sit down, son. I'll go to Brady. You wait here."

He was not gone long. When he returned his face wore a troubled look of bewilderment and hurt. "Brady already knew!" he said slowly. "He sent a posse to serve an attachment on Tunstall's ranch. He says there was a fight at the ranch, that Tunstall tried to get away, and when the posse gave chase he opened fire on them! He was killed resisting legal service, Brady says."

Billy was on his feet now, his eyes flashing. "That's a lie!" he said. "There was no fight at the ranch; no pursuit! And Tunstall didn't have a gun! According to the sign on the trail, he must've heard them coming and turned to wait for them. They shot him in cold blood!"

McSween sat for a moment in silence. "Brady gave permission that the body be moved, Billy," he said at last. "I've sent men out to fetch it here."

Afternoon shadows lengthened in the dusty street outside. Billy was standing with bowed head before the empty fireplace when Kathie came from school.

"Billy! My dear! What's hurt you so?" she cried.

"Tunstall's dead." He told her about it in a flat, hard monotone. "He was a man, and they sent a pack of mangy wolves to pull him down! If only I hadn't left him, Kathie!"

She did not speak, but in her heart of hearts she offered up a little prayer of thankfulness for the miracle that had taken him away into the hills that day. They would have killed him, too.

It was long past midnight before the Mexicans sent by McSween returned with Tunstall's body. Brewer brought the body to the McSween house, and they sat through the night beside their friend, staring bleakly into a future dark with threat.

All that night Murphy's saloon was the scene of wild hilarious revelry. Only Murphy himself remained aloof from the carouse. In the room back of the saloon he sat alone, mentally mustering his forces for the war to come.

NEWs of Tunstall's death spread through the Pecos River ranges like a tocsin to arouse the fighting men of either faction for the McSween-Murphy feud. From the mountains and from the range, men dropped their work and took up arms.

Breakfast at McSween's was a mockery. The courtyard rang with the sound of hammers where laborers shaped a rough pine box for Tunstall's last sad resting place.

A Mexican woman came to talk to McSween. She had seen the posse ride out of town, she said. McSween silenced her and would have taken her outside to talk in private but Billy pushed past him angrily. "Let her talk, McSween," he said. "Who were the men?"

She named them, as many of them as she could. Billy listened; turned away, to pad ceaselessly up and down, up and down.

They buried Tunstall that morning back of the McSween house on a grassy bench from which a man could see the river winding through the valley just below. McSween presided at the solemn little service.

It was over at last and the little procession filed slowly back to the house. Without a word of command they moved inside, filling McSween's front room to its capacity. The dead was buried and the time had come to plan revenge!

There were no less than fifty men in that gathering in McSween's prim parlor. John Chisum was there with a dozen men. Tunstall's cowboys had been called in. Frank Coe was there; and Uncle Joe Flack and Jess Wilder, both homesteaders now a few miles north of town.

Others were "Texas men"—men at arms, drawn here by the smell of war. One had a friend who stood with McSween; another had an enemy on Murphy's side. One reason was as good as the other. Here was war, and war was their trade. It mattered little on which side they fought, but once the choice was made it was a final one. Loyalty was a seldom-broken code in the Southwest.

It was inevitable that some of these men

were bad, just as it was inevitable that honest men should be embroiled on Murphy's side. But they were fighting men, experts in their craft, trained in the school of frontier war. McSween, among such men as these, was an anomaly; a lamb among a pack of hunting wolves.

The leadership resulting from his partnership with Tunstall rested heavily upon the peaceful McSween but he bore it manfully. His voice dominated the crowded room.

"It was murder, as cold-blooded and as damnable as murder can be made, the more so since it wore the cloak of false legality! Justice will be swift and sure. The law—"

Billy's harsh laughter interrupted him. "The law killed him, McSween! To hell with the law!"

"But what else is there, Billy?"

The Kid's voice made answer instantly. "I aim to kill the men who had part in Tunstall's murder! Every man, *sabe Usted?*"

A murmur of approval came from the men who packed the room. This was talk they understood. But McSween was speaking again.

"I understand your feelings, son. But we can't place ourselves on the level with murderers by resorting to murder for revenge."

Billy shrugged impatiently and turned away. "Tunstall was my friend."

Dick Brewer laid a restraining hand on Billy's arm. "Wait, Billy," he said. "John Wilson is a justice of the peace and he's promised to appoint me—or whoever McSween names—as a special constable with the power to swear in a posse and go out and get the men we want!"

A shout went up. Billy grinned crookedly. "So that's the law, eh? All right, Dick. Go get your badge! What're we waitin' on?"

There was more talk but the purpose of the meeting was accomplished then and there. Dick Brewer, as Tunstall's foreman, was named the head of McSween's fighting force.

BILLY wearied of the talk and left the room. Kathie met him and clutched his arm. "I had to see you. I—heard what you said, in there. You didn't mean it, did you?"

He avoided her gaze and seemed about

to pull away. "I meant it, all right," he said. "It's the only way I know!"

"But, Billy . . ." She faltered for a moment. "What about—me?" she said at last.

"Next to lovin' you and havin' your love back," he said slowly, "Tunstall's friendship was the finest thing I ever knew. If I didn't have the—guts—to square things up for him I wouldn't be fit to even look at you!"

There was silence between them for a little while. Kathie's face was very pale but she smiled bravely as she took his hand. "I think I—understand, my dear," she said.

He whirled swiftly, catching both her hands in his. "You mean—? Kathie! You'd go on lovin' me, even—?"

She nodded. "It would be a poor kind of love, Billy, that cost you your right to respect yourself," she said.

It was no easy thing, that decision she had made. It meant sleepless nights of staring at the dark and trembling at each sound. It meant denying all the fine instincts that made killing horrible for her. But according to his frontier code his course was plain.

He took her in his arms, careless of any watching eyes. "I never thought you'd understand," he whispered. "You're wonderful! I love you so! I know, partly, how much it's costin' you."

He kissed her then and turned as footsteps sounded in the yard. The men were pouring out of the house now and Kathie bent swiftly, kissing his hand and the emerald ring that was to be his talisman. "I love you," she whispered, and was gone.

He walked back slowly, meeting Brewer on the outskirts of the crowd. Brewer's greeting was gruff and friendly. "Come on, Kid. Let's go down and get sworn in!"

At noon that day eleven men swung up on waiting mounts at the McSween house and rode through the town toward the south. In the lead rode Special Constable Dick Brewer; and at his side, slim and erect and boyish, the deadliest gunman in New Mexico, The Kid.

Behind these two, nine other fighting men stretched out in grim parade. They were Frank McNab, John Middleton, Hendry Brown, Jim French, Sam Smith, Doc Skurlock, Ike McCloskey, Charles Bowdre and Uncle Joe Flack. Masked

though they were in the thin disguise of legal sanction it would have been difficult to find in all New Mexico eleven men more reckless, more dangerous than these, as they headed for the Murphy ranch with warrants for the arrest of Tunstall's murderers.

CHAPTER VIII

Prisoners

THE posse swung past a spot where a dead horse and a smear of blood marked Tunstall's fall, and Billy's face turned white. A mile further on Brewer glanced sidelong at The Kid.

"McSween's orders are to bring the prisoners in alive for trial."

Billy kept his eyes straight to the front. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

The discussion ended there. Doc Skurlock turned his head to grin at Hendry Brown. Brown winked.

They rested that night at Tunstall's ranch. Depressed, Billy stepped outside into the moonlight.

A shadow slid along the wall of an outbuilding and Billy leaped swiftly to the shelter of a corral fence as his guns whipped up. "Come out of that!" he called. "I've got you covered!"

A man stepped out into the moonlight, his hands held shoulder high. He was a stranger; a tall lean figure, somehow jaunty despite his attitude of surrender. The moonlight showed a youthful, not unpleasant face.

"Don't shoot." The stranger was unarmed and that fact in itself was strange. "I'm Tom O'Folliard."

Billy waited. O'Folliard shrugged and let his hands down slowly, hooking his thumbs in his belt. "I'm from Texas," he said. "Yo' name ain't Billy Bonney, is it, now?"

Billy's eyes narrowed. "That's right," he said. "So what?"

"Why, that's real nice!" O'Folliard's smile was honest and friendly. "How's chances fo' a job?"

Billy grinned a little. "Spoilin' for a fight, eh?"

"Well, now!" O'Folliard considered that. "That's mostly what I came here fo', at that. I run into a bunch o' men this mornin' that sort of decided me."

Billy nodded. "How was that?"

"Well, I came onto these men sort o' sudden-like and befo' I knew what was up they'd cut down on me and downed my horse! They took my guns and begun arguin' real undecided-like about whether they better kill me. I told 'em I was just a Texas man lookin' fo' a job, so they finally decided to take me to see a man named Murphy. It was a man named Baker suggested that."

Billy nodded again. "I know 'em!" he said. "Go on!"

"Well, they was in a hurry and I was a-foot so they left a pair o' greasers to bring me along. I busted one o' the greasers over the head and hunted me a hole. When they gave up lookin' fo' me I headed north again. Stopped in here, thinkin' I might get a meal. . . . If yo' name is Bonney, I'd admire to have a job with you. Judgin' by what them men said about you, I'll get along with you real well!"

Billy chuckled. "Come inside," he said.

Dick Brewer offered a tentative objection after O'Folliard was asleep.

"How d'you know he ain't a Murphy spy?" he asked.

Billy shrugged. "Suppose he is," he said; "there's no place I'd rather have a Murphy man than here where I can keep an eye on him. And if he's on the level he's an extra man."

They provided O'Folliard with guns and a mount and headed south next morning. Near noon they topped a ridge. Billy motioned O'Folliard to his side.

"How many men in that bunch that shot your horse?" he asked.

O'Folliard's answer was prompt. "Five, not countin' the two greasers."

Billy nodded. "Yonder they are!" he said.

They topped the ridge in a solid mass this time and Billy kept close beside the new recruit. Five men squatted beside a cooking fire not far from the ford and, as the posse charged, the five sprang up and fled, mounting hastily and heading south. The posse hit the ford without a check, yelling. The water was like ice and they plunged on through a solid wall of spray. Billy was gasping as his horse lunged up the opposite bank. O'Folliard, beside him, was laughing.

the hills. Billy shot a quick glance at Brewer. The two men riding west were Billy Morton and Frank Baker. If Brewer held to the southward course the three men ahead would almost certainly reach the Murphy ranch before being caught. That would mean hard fighting; possibly defeat. But Morton and Baker had made a mistake if Brewer only had the wit to see it in time!

O'Folliard saw it and swung close to Billy, shouting above the tumult of pounding hoofs. "If we swung right we'd have 'em!" he said. "By cuttin' off the corner now we'd save a mile!"

Billy nodded, waiting. Brewer yelled suddenly and flung up his hand. "Head west!" he yelled. "Let the others go!"

The change of course brought them into rifle range almost at once. Morton and Baker turned in their saddle to open fire and Billy reined aside a little, keeping to the left and a pace behind O'Folliard's mount. O'Folliard was grinning, intent upon the chase. His rifle came up, spitting viciously, and Billy saw the lead kick dust a yard ahead of Morton's laboring mount. A bit of higher ground cut off their view for a moment.

As they topped the rise Billy saw Morton and Baker head for a nester's shack, half dugout and half sod.

Billy leaned down swiftly, jerking his rifle from its sheath beneath his leg. "Take the leader's horse, O'Folliard!" he snapped.

The crisp crack of the Mannlicher was echoed almost instantly by O'Folliard's shot. Ahead, both horses stumbled heavily and Morton's mount dived to a smashing fall. Baker's horse tried hard to swerve, lost its footing, fell.

Baker and Morton were up now, bent almost double as they zigzagged toward the deserted shack. Billy reined back, jerking his mount to a standstill for a surer shot. The posse swept past him and a man swerved in, spoiling Billy's aim. Lead ripped the ground around the feet of the running pair, but they dived to cover seemingly untouched.

Almost instantly a raking fire blazed out from the door and window of the shack and Brewer called the posse back to safety. He was swearing dismally as he stopped beside The Kid.

"Now we've got to waste a lot of time starvin' 'em out of there, or else take

A HEAD of them the fugitives had separated. Three men kept on toward

a chance on rushin' 'em! What d'you say, Billy?"

"We'll make it a siege. We've got more time than men. It won't be long."

But it was two days later before a white rag fluttered in the doorway of the beleaguered shack and Morton, hoarse with thirst, yelled, "We'll give up if you'll promise that we won't be hurt!"

"All we want is to take you back for trial," Brewer said. "Come on out!"

The two men stepped out into the sunlight and laid down their arms. The posse closed in. Someone handed Morton a canteen and he drank thirstily. Baker took it from him greedily and emptied it. Morton's gaze fixed on Billy and he put out his hand.

"Howdy, Kid," he said. "Long time no see!"

Billy stood motionless, his eyes cold and veiled. "What makes you think I'd shake hands with a murderin' skunk like you, Morton?" he asked.

Morton stared. "Hell, I thought we was friends, Kid!" he said.

"Tunstall was my friend!" Billy's voice flamed with sudden anger.

"We'll head for Chisum's," Brewer announced. "We can spend the night there, and get some food. My belly says it's time to eat!"

That night Sally Chisum took Billy aside.

"I've been talking to your prisoners, Billy," she said gravely. "Both had written letters which they wanted me to mail for them. . . . They think you mean to kill them, Billy."

Billy's voice was unnaturally sharp. "Nothin' would please me more!" he said. "I never aimed to take prisoners, but now we've got them they needn't worry. We're takin' them to town. They'll be tried—and hung, if that's any satisfaction to 'em!"

She stepped forward suddenly and laid her hand upon his arm. He felt the hand tremble as she spoke softly. "I know," she said. "I . . . I miss him, too!"

A CHASTENED pair of prisoners mounted Chisum horses next morning to resume the march to Lincoln. Where they had been insolent before they were silent now, their eyes searching the faces of the possemen for signs to verify their fears.

"Some of the boys been throwin' a scare into 'em, I reckon," Brewer shrugged. "Let 'em sweat! It'll do 'em good!"

A man named Martin Chavez met them on the trail to town and turned about to ride beside Brewer for a little way. "Murphy's headin' thees way from Lincoln," he said tersely. "Got about a dozen men along; maybe more. Thought you'd ought to know."

He reined up then, letting the posse pass. Brewer glanced at Billy. "Be a fight sure if we meet that outfit," he said.

"We'd better swing west and go in past Agua Negra spring," Billy nodded. "We won't meet anybody on that trail."

They turned aside from the beaten road into a dim trail that led off toward the hills. Morton, alert for any sign, shot one fearful look at Baker. "Mighty lonely country up this way," he muttered. "Be a good place for a—lynchin'!"

The trail ran here between steep hills shrouded in the gloom of pinon pines. A narrow stream ran deep and dark beside the trail, murmuring sadly over lichened rock. It was a gloomy place and the very feel of it set the prisoners' nerves on edge.

Middleton, riding beside Frank Baker, shifted in his saddle and yawned sleepily.

Baker shot a quick glance at Morton and eased his horse a little nearer to Middleton. Brewer and The Kid were well in the lead now, and behind the prisoners the nearest posseman was a score of yards away. The trail curved sharply past a point of rock. A little valley opened just beyond the bend, spreading northward toward sunlit open slopes.

Baker whirled suddenly, shooting both bound fists at a spot just under Middleton's ear. The man sagged forward limply and Baker snatched the gun from Middleton's holster. McCloskey barked a startled oath as he swung his rifle up. Morton clutched the rifle barrel in both hands, jabbing the butt of it at McCloskey's groin. Over Morton's shoulder, Baker thrust Middleton's pistol at McCloskey's face and fired. McCloskey fell limply, his body making a resounding thud as it struck the ground.

Morton whirled, spurring toward the north, Baker close upon his heels. The nearest posseman was just rounding the point of rock behind them.

Billy whirled in his saddle at the sound of the shot; saw McCloskey fall; saw the prisoners' dash for liberty. He bent swiftly, ripping the Mannlicher from its sheath. Brewer kicked his horse around in hot pursuit, but Billy stopped him with a word. There were trees here, but an

open space lay just ahead of the fugitive and Billy brought the gun to aim.

It spoke once—twice. Four hundred yards away, Billy Morton flung up his hands and toppled backward off his horse. Frank Baker screamed hoarsely, twisting in the saddle like a tortured thing before he, too, rolled back across his horse's rump to strike the ground in a loose-limbed tumbling fall.

Back by the point of rock a man yelled a shrill admiring oath. Billy worked the rifle-bolt, sending the empty cartridges spinning. He bent forward a little, blowing the smoke from the rifle barrel. He looked up then, meeting Brewer's eyes.

"Yonder's your prisoners, Dick," he said. "Go pick 'em up!"

Brewer expelled a deep breath. "We'll catch hell for this!" he said.

Middleton rode up and made apologies to Brewer. "I reckon I was careless. They musta thought we was bringin' 'em up here to string 'em up."

Brewer nodded. "It's more my fault than yours," he said. "If I'd told 'em why we came this way this might not have happened."

Billy lit his smoke and inhaled deeply. "It's sort of—funny, in a way," he said slowly. "I mean, that Tunstall's gun should be the one to—do the job! I sort of hope he—knows that, somehow!"

CHAPTER IX

Challenge

A SORT of armed truce descended upon Lincoln County. The Murphy faction called it murder and swore bloody vengeance. A reward was posted for the Kid's capture "Dead or Alive." A similar reward was secretly offered, so rumor said, for McSween. Not for McSween alive, for he was not outside the law and so could not be held, but for McSween dead! And Murphy was said to be offering one hundred dollars in cash for the scalp of any McSween man.

But the Murphy forces stayed at Murphy's ranch on the Seven Rivers, avoiding contact with the flying squadron under Brewer and The Kid which scoured the country for Tunstall's murderers.

It was at the Tunstall ranch on the Rio Feliz one morning late in March that Billy met Pat Garrett for the second time.

Billy and Tom O'Folliard had arrived after a tedious two-day journey with two saddles and one horse, which they rode by turns, from the Ruidoso River country, arriving a full day too late to join Brewer and the rest of the posse on a dash into the Mescalero Reservation after a Murphy man reputed to be hiding there.

Billy answered Garrett's hail. "Howdy, Texas man! Light, and let your saddle rest!"

"Didn't expect to find you here," Garrett grinned. "Dropped in here to see what the place is like. . . . What'll become of it?"

"Depends on Tunstall's heirs, I reckon, if he had any heirs. . . . Why?"

Garrett lifted one long leg across the saddle horn and stepped down. "Had a lucky run with the cards lately. Not enough, maybe, but—I'd sure like to own a spread like this."

"Who wouldn't?" Billy's comment was tinged with irony but Garrett only grinned. O'Folliard came outside, limping slightly.

Billy laughed. "Some jasper dry-gulched us down on the Ruidoso a couple of days ago; killed Tom's horse. We had to ride and tie. We're both footsore."

"The hell of it is," O'Folliard said, "the jasper got away! In rough country like he was headin' for, a mule would walk a saddle horse to death, anyway."

"A mule, you say?" Garrett leaned forward with sudden interest. "Why, then that must've been old Buckshot Bill Roberts!" He laughed delightedly. "You're lucky. That old man's poison! He killed a man down in Texas and it took some twenty-odd Texas Rangers to bring him in. He's still packin' a load o' buckshot he got in that battle. He can't lift a gun to his shoulder, but he's deadly with a rifle or scattergun in spite of that. Shoots off-hand, from the hip."

"If he was hip-shootin' at us he was doin' a mighty accurate job of it," Billy said emphatically. "At long range, too. The last we saw of him he was headin' toward the Reservation."

As at their first meeting, Billy found himself strangely drawn to the big slow-talking Texan. Garrett stood up finally and moved toward his horse. "I've got to go," he said. "Maxwell'll give me hell if I don't get back today."

O'Folliard turned to Billy eagerly. "Let's go look for Lincoln with him, Kid!"

Billy nodded agreement. "You saddle while I leave a note for Dick, in case he comes this way."

But Brewer never came that way again.

A MOURNFUL cavalcade rode into Lincoln on the following day and halted in the courtyard back of McSween's house. One horse was riderless; three men were sorely hurt. Billy ran out to greet them and halted suddenly as he saw their plight.

"Good God!" he gasped. "What's happened?"

Frank Coe answered him, as they stepped inside. "We had a fight."

"With Murphy's gang?"

"Gang, hell! With Buckshot Bill Roberts! He like to whipped the lot of us! We was eatin' dinner in Blazer's Mill, down in the Reservation. We never found the men we went after and we was comin' home. I finished eatin' first and went outside, and there was Buckshot Bill a-ridin' in on a flap-eared mule!

"I went down to meet him; told him there's a dozen of us in the mill and he better either drift or give up peaceable. He said he wouldn't give up because we'd kill him if he did, and I said, 'We wouldn't do a thing like that,' and he said, 'That's what yuh told Morton and Baker, too!'"

Coe paused and shot a doubtful look toward The Kid. Billy's face was expressionless and set.

"The rest o' the boys finished eatin' then and Bowdre was the first one out. He seen Bill and went for his gun. They fired together, Roberts shootin' from the hip with his Winchester. Bowdre caught Roberts in the chest and Roberts' rifle slug tore the cartridge belt plumb off Bowdre and knocked him back against the wall.

"Middleton come runnin' up from the corral where he'd been guarding the horses and Roberts drilled him through the chest. My brother George comes out o' the mill with a gun in his hand and Roberts shoots the gun out of his hand, cuttin' a finger off as clean as if he'd done it with a knife."

A fine beading of sweat stood out on Coe's face as the shock of that sudden battle shook him once again.

"That all happened so fast it sounded like a pack o' fireworks all goin' off at once! The boys kept insistin' a minute then, havin' got a beautifulustin' out that door! Roberts keepin'

his eye on me and staggerin', and ducked into a storage room behind the mill. I knew he was bad hit and I told Brewer to let him be, that he was the same as dead already. But Dick was sore at the way Roberts had tore up the boys and he sneaks out to a woodpile where he can maybe get a shot at Buckshot Bill. . . . First time Dick pokes his head up to draw a bead, Roberts drilled him square between the eyes!"

Coe wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "When we busted in on Roberts later on," he said, "we found him layin' dead beside the door. . . . We buried both of them, out there."

Billy bent forward suddenly, covering his face. Kathie held tightly to his arm. It was McSween who broke the silence.

"Dick loved Tunstall. . . . And so the score is even again! Why can't we have peace?"

Billy's eyes changed slowly as Kathie had seen them do before; frank laughing eyes turned into curtained windows hiding his mind. There was no use, he thought, in talking to McSween.

Frank Coe spoke again, quietly. "The question now," he said, "is, who's to lead this bunch?"

O'Folliard looked up quickly. "I'm new here," he said. "Maybe I'm talkin' out o' turn. But—if you want to know who's the leader here, you ask the Murphy men! Who do they hate the most? Who do they fear? . . . Bill Bonney! So why not put The Kid in charge? There's no man in the Southwest I'd rather follow!"

There was a murmur of approval throughout the room. McSween crossed the room and held out his hand to Billy. "I trust you, Billy," he said. "If it must be war, I don't know of any man more able to command a fighting force!"

It was an amazing tribute to a boy of eighteen years. But it was a choice eminently pleasing to the McSween fighting men. Where Brewer had been cautious Billy would attack.

But McSween's confidence was destined to be sorely tried.

IN THE adobe-walled courtyard beside the McSween store, on April 1st, Billy sat in the shade with Charlie Bowdre, Tom O'Folliard, Jim French, Fred Wayte and Frank McNab. The day was still and beautiful. Yonder on the slope overlook-

ing the town was the grassy bench where they had laid Tunstall to rest.

O'Folliard, sitting beside him, chewed idly on a blade of grass. "If McSween'd only turn us loose!"

Talk dwindled. Footsteps sounded in the street beyond the adobe wall and voices came to them, growing stronger as the speakers came abreast. One said:

"Judge Bristol, down at Mesilla, sent word this mornin' that he wouldn't hold court here this month on account he's scared o' them McSween men. . . . Damn that Kid, anyway! I'd like t' put a bullet in his guts!"

Charlie Bowdre lifted his head above the courtyard wall and sank down again. "Billy!" he whispered stridently. "That's Brady now! Billy Matthews and Dad Peppin and George Hindman are with him! What're *they* doin' down in this end o' town?"

Billy shrugged as he came to his feet. "I'll ask 'em!" he said, obligingly.

He stepped forward swiftly, past the end of the low adobe wall. "Hi, Brady!" he said. "What brings you down into this end of town? Lookin' for a chance to put that bullet in my guts?"

Behind him O'Folliard and the others lunged to their feet, catching up the rifles stacked against the wall. Brady whirled swiftly, his jaw dropping. Billy Matthews, standing at Brady's left, leaped sideways and crouched.

Billy laughed softly, taunting them. "That's right, Matthews! Get in on this! They tell me you shot Tunstall off his horse! And, Brady, you're the man that sent that posse out! I'm glad to meet the two of you! Now—make your play!"

Brady and Matthews moved in unison, jerking up the rifles in their hands. Billy's hands streaked down and up, whipping his hip-guns into play. From behind him, a rattling volley of rifle fire raked the sunlit street. A slug from Matthews' rifle slit the cloth of Billy's sleeve. Matthews whirled as he fired and darted south a dozen yards into the shelter of a house across the street. Dad Peppin reached the same cover just ahead of him.

In the street, Sheriff Brady's arms shot up spasmodically, hurling his rifle high into the air. He stumbled forward a step or two and fell, shot through the heart. George Hindman had not even paused to fire a shot but ran straight down the road until a rifle bullet cut him down.

Billy stepped back to the cover of the courtyard wall. "Well, damn the luck!" he said. "I got Brady all right, but I must've missed Billy Matthews clean!"

Frank McNab chuckled nervously. "I got Hindman!" he said. "I reckon it ain't such a bad day's work, at that!"

O'Folliard was still standing by the wall staring out at Brady's body in the road. "Say, Billy," he said. "That's a real handsome gun and rifle of Brady's."

"Let's get 'em, then," Billy said. "Maybe if we come out in the open Billy Matthews will show his head again."

They walked out together and O'Folliard stooped and caught up Brady's rifle. Billy bent down, unbuckling the gunbelt at Brady's waist. A rifle bullet seared a shallow furrow across his hip and he straightened swiftly, flipping a hurried shot at Matthews' face in a doorway across the street. The slug splintered the door jamb an inch to the left of its mark as Matthews dodged back out of sight. Billy rubbed his hip gingerly and grinned at O'Folliard as they walked back into the shelter of the wall.

"That's the first time I ever got spanked by a bullet!" he said. "I'll have to eat my meals standin' up, I reckon, for awhile!"

He sobered instantly as he saw McSween emerging from the side door of the store. "Billy, for God's sake, what have you done?" McSween's voice was shocked, incredulous.

Billy dropped his eyes, digging the toe of his foot into the ground like a chastened boy. "Just downed a couple of jaspers that was snoopin' around where they had no business to be."

"It's murder you've committed, I tell you! Have you no shame?" In his rage McSween was almost magnificent.

Billy faced him then, his eyes bleak but unwavering. "They're Murphy men, sir. Hindman and Brady. And they went for their guns. That ain't murder, I reckon, not in this country."

"But why, Billy? Why did you do it?"

"Well, they came walkin' by, tellin' what they'd do to me, so I stepped out and asked why they didn't begin doin' it! They went for their guns and we dropped as many as we could!"

"You stepped out and challenged them!" McSween pounced upon Billy's words like a terrier. "You have hurt my cause more today than Murphy

himself could do! Public opinion will call this thing murder, Billy, as I do! I tell you now that, when this sorry business is at an end, I shall consider it my duty as a citizen to have you brought to trial for this day's work!"

The denunciation was like an unexpected blow in the face to Billy. He stared at McSween incredulously. His face turned deathly white.

"I reckon that's about enough, McSween," he said slowly. "They told me before I ever saw you that you'd turned your coat once from Murphy to Chisum. Once a turncoat, always a turncoat, I reckon."

He turned, stalking stiffly down toward the barns. O'Folliard followed him, his boyish face twisted with alarm and bewilderment. "God-a'mighty, Kid, who'd've thought he'd take it like that, eh? What d'you aim to do? Quit him?"

Billy shook his head. "I—can't do that," he said. "I've been fightin' for Tunstall all along. But now, I'll fight accordin' to my own ideas! . . . Hell! I never thought McSween would let me down!"

He could not see that McSween had acted regardless of everything except his own unswerving sense of right and wrong.

CHAPTER X

Sheriff's Posse

BILLY rode out of Lincoln full of hurt bewilderment and sullen anger. He and Tom O'Folliard headed for South Spring ranch.

"Chisum will understand," Billy thought. "But—what about Kathie?"

Chisum met him on the broad front porch. "Howdy, Kid! Glad to see you! You haven't treed any more he-coons like Buckshot Roberts, have you?"

Billy watched Chisum's face as he delivered his message. "I've just killed Sheriff Brady, sir," he said. "And Frank McNab killed George Hindman."

There was astonishment in Chisum's face but no reproof. "Sit down, Billy," he said quietly. "How'd it come about?"

Tersely, without attempt at justification or excuse, Billy told the story. Chisum leaned back in his chair and lay down across the rolling rug. "It was some little time

"McSween," he said at last, "lives so close to God I reckon he can't understand us ordinary men. He was educated for the ministry." Chisum's calm gaze turned to rest on Billy's face. "You ain't aimin' to—quit us, are you, Kid?" he asked.

"Not as long as the men who killed Tunstall are alive, I don't intend to quit! If McSween's through with me I'll go ahead alone!"

Chisum nodded. "I thought so," he said. "You're as loyal as they come. There'll be a fine howl raised about this thing, of course. But havin' Brady out of the way is worth a lot. This gives us a chance to elect a good man in Brady's place. With the law on our side we could go ahead and clean this county up."

Billy nodded, greatly comforted. "But how about—Kathie? McSween will turn her against me, I reckon, if he can."

Chisum laid a friendly hand on Billy's knee. "McSween ain't a man to do you dirt behind your back, son," he said. "And if I know Kathie she ain't a girl to go back on her friends! She'll be hurt, naturally; but—I'll have a talk with her and McSween."

"I'm mighty grateful," Billy said with deep sincerity.

During the weeks that followed Billy lay low. Chisum, riding under the guard of five or six McSween fighting men, kept Billy informed as to the progress of affairs. An election was held, and an honest figurehead, John Copeland, was made Sheriff of Lincoln County.

"Nobody was prevented from votin'," Chisum chuckled. "The whole thing was carried off plumb legal and above-board. Of course, the town was pretty full of our men and it did seem as though most of Murphy's friends found it inconvenient to get to the polls, but they can't blame us for that! Copeland's in and the goose hangs high!"

That night for the first time since Brady's death Billy rode to Lincoln to see Kathie. She met him gravely and they talked. "I can't approve of what you did, Billy, because killing men is horrible to me. But I think I can understand how you feel and I've gotten over the first shock of it. You see, I love you."

McSween, too, seemed to have forgotten the first edge of his anger. Billy rode back to South Spring that night happier than he had been for many days.

MAJOR Murphy, however, was not the man to give up the reins of power meekly. He carried his case straight to Territorial Governor Samuel B. Axtell in Santa Fe.

John Chisum paced the broad front porch of his South Spring ranch house in a towering rage as he told the news.

"Murphy has strong pull and he painted us to the Governor as a bunch of lawless bloodthirsty killers responsible for everything that's happened here! His political friends vouched for him and the Governor swallowed it. Axtell removed Cope-land from the office of Sheriff and named Dad Peppin in his place. We're out and Murphy's in again!"

Billy shook his head. "I was sort of glad Dad Peppin got away that day we downed Brady," he said, "but now it looks like we should've made a clean sweep of it!"

"Murphy ain't the only man that's got friends higher up!" Chisum told him angrily. "Angell, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, is already on his way to Washington to take this thing before the President himself!"

Meanwhile, Sheriff Peppin and a posse of twenty-odd Murphy fighting men patrolled the Pecos Valley between the Murphy ranch and Lincoln. The town was divided against itself, the east end being occupied by McSween men.

Sheriff Peppin's riding was not entirely for show. One day early in July, Frank Coe, Jim Saunders, and Frank McNab halted for a drink at a roadside spring near a ranchhouse in the upper Bonita Canyon. Frank Coe finished drinking first and stepped back to hold the horses.

"I could drink more," he said, "but I'm savin' room for that good beer I aim to get when we hit town."

He glanced toward the ranchhouse as he spoke and saw a tiny spurt of flame. He ducked and yelled a warning. A rifle bullet sang above his head and the sharp flat crack of the shot brought slapping echoes from the cliffs. A pack of mounted men swept past the corner of the house, their guns barking like so many hounds. Coe hit the saddle in a desperate leap, driving in his spurs.

Behind him, Frank McNab and Saunders fought startled mounts into control. McNab whipped out a gun and sent a pair of shots screaming back between the canyon walls, but there was little time for careful

aim. He set his spurs and followed Coe and Saunders in a headlong flight.

Coe, looking back, saw McNab's horse go down. He pulled up quickly, measuring the chances of a stand. Even as he looked, Saunders' horse dived nose-first in a sliding fall. McNab was on his feet now, firing as he darted for the brush. A bullet felled him in midstride. Saunders had landed running and was out of sight. Coe turned again and hugged his saddle horn, riding for his life.

But he had wasted too much time. His horse stumbled drunkenly and fell. Coe hustled forward in a smashing fall. Through a sightless daze he heard the pound of the approaching hoofs; heard a rider haul up in a sudden stop and grunt as his horse bucked under him. Coe shook his head in a desperate attempt to clear his eyes. The blurred figure over him took shape.

"Don't shoot me, Ollinger! I give up!"

Coe twisted desperately as the gun in Ollinger's hand spat flame. Rolling, Coe whipped his own gun up and emptied it. The vicious *chit-chat* of the forty-fives rolled swiftly to a close. A second rider swept down between the two and knocked up Ollinger's smoking gun.

"For God's sake, Bob! You've killed a helpless man!"

Coe found his voice then, speaking in a daze. "I ain't hit!" he said. "He missed me—every time!"

LATER that day, telling the story to The Kid at South Spring ranch, Coe spoke as one who has survived a miracle. "It don't seem possible that Ollinger could miss me like he did!"

Billy shrugged. "It ain't so hard to miss," he said. "He's one of that posse I'm gunnin' for, sort of special! He's the meanest man Murphy's got and that is goin' some!"

O'Folliard cut in then excitedly. "What happened then?"

Coe shrugged. "They took me in to Lincoln. Some of our boys seen us pass and started shootin' and Peppin's boys ducked for cover. They put a man to guardin' me but he got interested in the fight and I stole me a horse and fanned it out o' there."

Billy suddenly. "They still fight you think?"

Coe shook his head. "Bowdre saw me

get away. The shootin' stopped before I cleared the town."

It was that night that word came from Washington. John Chisum was smiling proudly when Billy met him on the porch.

"President Rutherford B. Hayes has considered the situation here," Chisum said a little pompously, "and, while he feels sure that Governor Axtell acted in all good faith in oustin' Copeland and makin' Peppin Sheriff, he thinks the Governor exceeded his authority! So President Hayes is removin' Axtell and puttin' General Lew Wallace in as Territorial Governor of New Mexico!"

Billy whooped delightedly. "Hurrah for Hayes!" he said. "That sort of takes Murphy's backin' away from him, eh? . . . But who's this man Wallace? Can we count on him?"

"He's a lawyer and a writer; Brigadier-General in the war and a real important man. He'll see that we get a square deal, all right!"

Billy grinned. "That bein' the case, I reckon that tomorrow I'll ride in town! I'm plenty tired of stayin' holed up like this."

He turned, lifting his hat to put it on his head. It left his fingers suddenly and a rifle bullet kicked a little cloud of dust from the adobe wall of Chisum's house. The flat crack of the shot came almost instantly, followed by a second and a third. Billy stooped quickly, picking up his hat and motioning Chisum through the door. There was a jagged hole in the crown of the hat and Billy thrust a finger through it.

A group of horsemen were silhouetted against the sky north of the house and Billy identified a man or two before he followed Chisum inside.

"It looks," he said, "as if killin' McNab has fired Dad Peppin up with new enthusiasm! He followed Coe out here, I reckon, aimin' to get him and O'Folliard and me!"

"The nerve of him!" Chisum growled. "Firin' into my house! . . . You take charge, Billy. You're in command."

Billy nodded and glanced at Coe. "Get up on the roof, Frank, with a rifle and plenty of shells."

He opened the front door as he spoke and stepped outside. A rifle shot greeted him, ripping splinters from the porch. Guns were already popping from the ranch buildings and the posse had scattered to surround Billy

crossed the yard at an easy trot, pausing once to thumb his nose toward the hills. He was laughing when he joined O'Folliard at the bunkhouse, but O'Folliard cursed him heartily.

"You damn cock-sure little fool!" he said. "What's the big idea, takin' a chance like that?"

"Aw, Tom, they couldn't hit me at that range! I'm small, you know! . . . We got twelve men. Peppin hasn't got a chance!"

A Chisum cowboy spoke up eagerly. "There's fifteen or twenty of our boys at a line camp 'bout seven miles from here. If I could get them we maybe could get that Peppin bunch between us. . . ."

Billy grinned. "Swell idea!" he said. "But play it safe, *sabe*? We're not in any danger here. If you can't get through without too big a risk, come back."

"There's a gully just beyond the corral. They'll never get a shot at me!"

"O. K.! Tom, you boys cover him, *sabe*? I'm goin' back up on the roof."

He circled the yard first, however, trotting from vantage point to vantage point to make sure of the distribution of his men.

CHISUM wiped the perspiration from his brow when Billy arrived inside the house once more.

"Damn it, Billy!" he said explosively. "Don't you know that if Peppin downed you he'd have us whipped? None of the rest of us could hold these gun-fightin' gents together! And you amble right out in the open and dare 'em to shoot at you!"

Billy sobered instantly. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "Gettin' some action after all this layin' around sort o' made me crazy, I reckon."

Billy joined Frank Coe on the roof, but Peppin's men were wary and targets were few and far between.

The night was bare of incident. The cordon of men on the hills kept up a scattering fire and the defenders lay behind thick 'dobe walls, vigilant and impregnable.

Dawn brought a sudden ending of the farce. Over a ridge to the south a troop of horsemen rode at a high lope, sweeping down in a noisy charge. Before them, like sheep before the dogs, Dad Peppin's possemen took to their mounts and fled and the Chisum cowboys rode in triumphantly, having broken up the siege.

Peppin must have known that such a

siege must fail; that it would need weeks or months to rout Chisum's fighting men from such a fortress as the South Spring ranch. The battle was merely the curtain-raiser to the more serious drama soon to start.

Before noon that day Billy and O'Folliard and six members of the McSween flying squadron rode toward Lincoln. Billy was jubilant. Victory seemed assured!

He said as much to Kathie that night in McSween's home. "It's all over now but the shoutin'! Governor Wallace is on our side and we'll clean this county up. Nothin' but Murphy's political pull made me an outlaw in the first place. As soon as things calm down a bit I'll get me a piece of land and some cows and settle down."

"Oh, I hope so, Billy! I'd be so glad! You don't know what all this has meant to me, my dear. Never knowing where you were—what you were doing—what danger you were in—not even knowing for sure that you were still alive. It's been a nightmare!"

He took her in his arms and comforted her and kissed her lips and she clung to him, weeping a little, laughing a little, loving him. The world seemed very bright that afternoon and they were happier than they had been in many months.

CHAPTER XI

Adobe Siege

A HORSEMAN drew up in front of the McSween house with a mighty clattering of hoofs. Billy freed himself from Kathie's arms and stood up, smiling down at her.

A quick knock sounded at the door and Billy laid a hand caressingly upon her shoulder as he turned. The door opened and Billy stiffened instinctively, hands poised above his guns. He relaxed at once when he saw the caller's face, a little ashamed of his own alertness. The man at the door was Martin Chavez, who had warned the Brewer posse.

"Howdy, Martin," he said. "What's up?"

"*Salud*, Billee!" Chavez shot a quick glance at Kathie and beckoned Billy nearer. They stepped outside together and Billy pulled the door shut behind him. Chavez spoke in a quick excited whisper.

"A big posse of Peppin men have fol-

low' you boys in," he said. "You know that?"

Billy nodded. "They kept out of rifle range. What of it?"

"Eet looks bad to me, Billee!" Chavez was frankly worried. "The town is full of Murphy men; sixty, at least, countin' the posse that just come in! Where is McSween?"

"Out on the Ruidoso."

Chavez nodded. "I hear things, Billee, that maybe a man of another race not hear, *sabe Usted?* I hear those Murphy men believe they have you trapped here and plan to capture you. Me, I ride now to bring McSween, *pronto!*"

Billy nodded slowly. "All right, Chavez," he said. "I appreciate it, too. This is the second good turn you've done for me."

Chavez made a quick gesture disclaiming praise. He mounted quickly and spurred away.

Billy stepped back inside the house and Kathie sensed at once the change in him. She stood up, suddenly pale. "What is it, Billy?" she whispered. "What has happened now?"

"Nothing, yet," he smiled reassuringly. "Chavez has been hearin' talk among the Mexicans, that's all. Don't you worry, now. There's eight of us here, and the place is a fort. . . . You wait here while I go tell the boys what Chavez said."

He told the men in the courtyard what Chavez had said. "Bowdre, you and George Coe and Hendry Brown slip over to the McSween store and bring us a supply of ammunition. Then go back to the store. That'll give us a cross-fire in case they rush us."

He grinned suddenly. "Be sort of funny if they *did* jump us, wouldn't it? I've been figurin' all day how we could get 'em in a corner where they'd have to fight!"

O'Folliard swore delightedly. "We'll make 'em think they got a grizzly by the tail."

Billy was smiling when he returned to Kathie. "The boys are spoilin' for a fight. It's too bad to disappoint 'em, but I don't think Peppin's fool enough to tackle us when we're fortified up like this."

They sat together there and talked quietly while the evening shadows lengthened in the town. . . . on tiptoe, giggling like excited children to vantage points about the

Kathie shivered a little as if with cold. Billy turned to her, patting her hand. "Now, Kathie! You mustn't worry, I tell you!"

"I know. But waiting like this—"

A man's voice lifted from behind the house in a challenging hail. "Hello-o-o the house!" Kathie's voice broke off suddenly and she stared at Billy, her eyes widening with sudden fear.

Again the hail: "Hello-o-o the house! You, Billy! We want to talk to you!"

Billy stood up quickly, his eyes fixed in the direction of the sound. He spoke softly, hurriedly, without looking down. "Sit here, Kathie. I'll find out what they want."

He left her quickly, running silently on tiptoe to halt beside a heavy outer door and open it a crack, keeping his body out of line.

"Hello yourself!" he called. "What d'you want?"

"We want you, Billy!" The answer was instant and harsh. "We got you surrounded and outnumbered ten to one. You boys walk out now and lay down your guns or we'll kill the last damn one o' you!"

Billy laughed again. "That's Peppin talkin', ain't it? Well, Dad, did you ever hear the recipe for makin' rabbit pie? The first thing 's, you have to catch your rabbit!"

Peppin, safely sheltered behind the barns at the rear of the house, ripped out an oath. "This ain't no joke, Billy!" he shouted. "You better surrender! You'll never get away!"

Billy's answer was angry this time. "Come in and get me, damn you! If it's fight you're lookin' for you'll get a belly-ful!"

HIS SLAMMED the door and dropped its heavy bar in place. At a window facing the barns Tom O'Folliard chuckled. "That's tellin' 'em, Billy! Looks like we'd get a battle out o' this in spite o' hell!"

"Listen!" Billy stiffened suddenly, alert and tense. From the east there came to him the rumbling thunder of running hoofs, swelling swiftly to a deep full-throated roar. Shrill yells, the whip-like crack of rifle shots, all blended in a torrent of sound that rushed down toward the McSween house. Billy whirled, darting toward the front of the building. Doc Skurlock met him there and he was grinning broadly.

"It's McSween!" he said. "McSween with thirty-odd men! I reckon that'll put a different tune in Peppin's song, eh, Kid?"

The tumult outside ceased before Billy could reach the window. "Where did they go?" he asked.

Skurlock pointed. "Turned off yonder behind the Patron house. Patron's a friend o' Chavez. So's Montana, next door to Patron. I reckon McSween will scatter his men in them two houses. We'll have this end o' town pretty darn well fortified up!"

Billy nodded. "Too well, maybe! I'm afraid McSween's comin' will scare Dad Peppin off. Too bad McSween didn't hold off till the fight started and then come in and squeeze the Peppin gang between him and us!"

Skurlock shrugged. "He ain't used t' this kind o' thing."

Darkness fell soon after that and within an hour McSween had taken advantage of the cover so afforded to enter his own house. With him came five friends, all Mexicans but all able fighting men. They were Vincente Romero, Francisco Semora, Ygenio Salazar, Jose Chavez y Chavez, and Ignacio Gonzales. The little garrison inside the house greeted them tumultuously but McSween was solemn and a little pale.

"What's happened, Billy?" He asked. "Do you think they mean to force a fight?"

Billy nodded. "Unless Dad Peppin loses his nerve. Murphy'll want to clean us out before the new Territorial Governor upsets his applecart."

McSween nodded. "I've been afraid of that," he said. "But Murphy is not in town. He's in Santa Fe, very sick. Perhaps Peppin won't attack without Murphy's support. I pray we can avoid a fight!"

Behind McSween, Doc Skurlock met Billy's eyes and winked.

The siege settled into a night of wakefulness.

It was a strangely assorted group that gathered at early dawn in the McSween dining room. McSween himself, hollow-eyed and weary from a night of prayer. Ranged against him, his ten young fighting men, hoping for the very thing he feared. Billy and Tom O'Folliard were like hounds on leash, the scent of battle in their nostrils like champagne. Mrs. McSween was smiling and cheerful. Kathie was pale with

sleeplessness, quick to smile when her eyes met Billy's but relapsing into worry afterward.

McSween lifted his hand in benediction over the meal awaiting them. There was a moment of silence. Then the crashing thunder of the guns.

From Murphy's store and hotel Murphy's fighting men were pouring volley after volley at the McSween house, shattering its doors and windows with a leaden hail. The Montana and Patron houses were also under fire. The battle was begun!

Billy whirled at the first volley, darting through the house to an east window. Nothing moved outside but he could see the licking tongues of fire from the Murphy guns in the buildings further down the street. He turned and found O'Folliard beside him.

"I thought at first it was a rush," he said. "But I reckon they won't try that, knowin' that we're set for them. Mind waitin' for the second table, Tom? I'll take half the boys to eat while the rest of you stand guard."

Breakfast ended, the beleaguered garrison returned the Murphy fire with searching shots. The racket of the guns was incessant. Both sides had ammunition in plenty and used it without stint. But it was a waste of lead. The Murphy marksmen fired from behind strong barricades in the Murphy buildings or from well-chosen covers on the rocky slope that overlooked the town. The McSween force fought from behind yard-thick adobe walls.

THE DAY dragged on. The firing dwindled to spasmodic bursts as pairs of riflemen fought out individual duels. O'Folliard fretted restlessly and cursed such a fight.

Doc Skurlock wore a bloody bandage on his left hand and Billy bent over him solicitously. Skurlock growled an oath. "Hell, no, I ain't hit! *Nobody's* hit! Been enough powder burned to sink a battleship and not a man on either side so much as scratched! This rag? Aw, Miss Kathie wrapped it on me. I scratched my hand on a piece o' glass awhile ago when I was tryin' to get a quick shot at that jasper up in Murphy's store!"

Afternoon shadows lengthened and again the twilight came and with it, silence. McSween, standing beside Billy, gave thanks. "Perhaps the battle is over?"

Chavez glanced at Billy and shrugged and turned away. Billy spoke to McSween. "Don't fool yourself," he said. "They've got us penned up here and they won't let us go if they can help it. You let me go back with Chavez and take his men and swing around behind the Murphy store. When daylight comes we'll smoke 'em out of there; pinch 'em between us and this house. We can give that outfit a whipping that'll end the war before the sun's an hour high tomorrow mornin'!"

Chavez turned, grinning broadly. "That ees it!"

But McSween shook his head. "No, Billy. I won't let you. If we must fight, let it be a defensive fight at least!"

He turned away, refusing argument.

Chavez protested excitedly. "He ees the boss, maybe, but you, Billee—you say what to do, these men will do it! Let McSween pray, my friend; you and I, we will fight!"

But Billy shook his head. "We're supposed to be fightin' for him. Why, if we went against him, even if we won, he might make us outlaws for it! Let's give him another day. Maybe McSween will change his mind."

And so another night wore through.

IN THE room back of Murphy's bar, Murphy's lieutenants gathered. They, too, were weary of the sort of fighting this first day had shown.

"Why not send a party in tonight and take 'em by surprise?" This from Dolan.

Old Man Pearce, Peppin's right-hand man, shook his head. "The Kid's no fool and he was brung up on Injun fightin'. Anyway, it's bright moonlight."

Peppin spoke next. "They're all crack shots, them devils. The Kid himself would drop a man with every shot in his guns and do it so fast you'd hardly count the shots! So rushin' 'em's no good." He leaned back a little, his eyes narrowing. "Who's the best rifle shot in our outfit?"

The others exchanged glances. "Charlie Crawford's as good as any. Lays between him and Lucio Montoya, maybe."

"We'll use 'em both!" Peppin leaned forward again. "Send Crawford and Montoya up that hill back o' McSween's house to a point where they can command the windows of the Montana and Patron houses. Send light enough to shoot, have 'em keep steady fire on all the windows so's a man can't stick

his head up in any one of 'em! Pretty soon the men guardin' them windows will give up tryin' to shoot out of 'em and then we'll send some men in behind the McSween house and set fire to it!"

Dolan stared. "But Dad, McSween's house is 'dobe!"

"They's wood in it, ain't they? Floors, ceilin's, rafters, doors, all that sort o' thing? It'll burn, all right! And we'll keep Billy's outfit so busy they won't have no time t' put it out! Pretty soon the fire'll drive 'em out and then . . ." He made an expressive gesture.

Slow grins broke out on weathered faces as the scheme took hold of their imaginations.

"That's a great idea, Dad!" Dolan said at last. "It ought t' work!"

CHAPTER XII

Fighting With Fire

BILLY stood beside a deeply recessed window as the dawn broke over the Pecos on that second day. High up on the slope overlooking the house a rifle cracked sharply and Billy shrugged. "They're startin' early," he said. "That jasper's shootin' at the Montana house."

O'Folliard peered up toward the hidden marksman. "There's two of 'em, almost a thousand yards uphill." Other rifles took up the beat and the McSween guns began to answer. The firing came in little bursts spaced wide apart. Only the two rifles high up on that rocky slope behind the house fired steadily. First one; then the other. *Crack—crack—crack—crack.*

In the Montana and Patron houses those whining bullets pounded relentlessly at the windows facing on the slope. Lead ripped the window sills, struck spurts of dust from the adobe walls, sprayed shards of glass into the rooms.

Meanwhile, the men in Murphy's store and hotel concentrated on the McSween house. Billy posted guards while McSween and the women remained in rooms facing on the inner court.

Tom O'Folliard was cursing steadily when Billy returned to him. "Damn it, Billy, I can't seem to get the range on them jaspers yonder on the hill."

Billy stared up the steep incline. He located the two reluctant marksmen at last, both well hidden behind low heaps

of rock. He could see their heads lift up above the barricades, first one, then the other: *Crack—crack—crack—crack.* The steady beat of those guns was monotonous; nerve-shattering.

Billy spoke without turning his head. "Hand me my rifle, Tom. I'll smoke those jaspers out for you."

O'Folliard laughed derisively. "Want to bet on that?"

Jim French, at a nearby window, fired two quick shots and turned excitedly, speaking to Billy. "Three jaspers are sneakin' up toward the barns with a can of oil, Billy! I just fanned 'em, but they ducked down out o' sight! The boys in Patron's house could stop 'em but they don't seem to be shootin'."

Billy nodded. "They *can't* shoot," he said. "Not while those two rifles on the hill are poundin' them."

Billy's eyes were fixed once more on the distant hill. "Ten bucks says I get a hit inside of, say, five shots, Tom?"

O'Folliard chuckled. "Bet!" he said.

The Mannlicher steadied, spat sharply, and Billy waited motionless. A spurt of white dust swirled up on the hill above and O'Folliard laughed.

"One gone!" he said.

Billy watched a man's head disappear up there behind the rock; counted softly beneath his breath until it reappeared. The count reached six. He tried it again. The count remained the same. He brought the rifle up, still counting. He inhaled slowly; held the breath. At five, a line of black showed just above the rock. Billy's trigger finger tightened. *Six!* The rifle cracked as the line of black above the rock became the outline of a man's head.

A shrill scream sent rocketing echoes down across the town. High up on the rocky southern slope Charlie Crawford lurched to his feet and swayed a moment, flinging out his arms. He toppled forward suddenly, hurtling from his ledge and tumbling down—down—in a fall that seemed endless, rolling to the bottom of the hill.

Tom O'Folliard said, "My God!" From the Montana and Patron houses the men under the command of Martin Chavez sent up a hoarse triumphant yell. A yell of rage went up from Murphy's store.

The second rifle on the hill had paused for a moment but it was going again now, more rapidly. The Mannlicher steadied suddenly and spat again. Then sunlight

glinted on steel as the second man up there flung his gun high in the air and toppled back behind the ledge. His rifle slid down the slope as Crawford's body had done a moment ago.

FROM the Patron and Montana houses came a rattling volley of rifle fire as men returned to their posts.

Billy turned away. O'Folliard called after him, "I owe you ten, Billy!" but Billy seemed not to hear. Killing men in the heat of battle, or spurred by some sudden need, was one thing; cold, calculating target work like this was another. He hoped, dully, that the fellow who had tumbled down was dead before he fell. . .

Behind the McSween barns, in the bottoms of the Bonita, Jimmy Dolan and Charles Hall and Andy Boyle huddled close beneath the bank, unable to go forward or retreat. The can of oil and the chips and the load of pitch-pine faggots they had brought were useless.

Andy Boyle grunted suddenly and touched Dolan's arm. "Look yonder!" he said. He pointed a little south of west where a tall thick cloud of dust moved steadily across a ridge.

Dolan grunted an oath. "Take a lot o' men t' raise a dust like that!" he growled. "It must be Chisum and his cowboys."

Boyle shook his head. "That dust's further west than the trail Chisum would come by."

A horseman appeared suddenly at the western end of Lincoln's central street and sunlight glittered gayly on saber steel and gilded epaulets. The guns in the Murphy buildings ceased their fire. A second trooper trotted into view bearing a bright guidon atop a gilt-tipped shaft. Back of him, in column of fours, long lines of men in uniform, carbines unslung, poured down the street and past the Murphy store. The clang of saber chains and the solid thud of trotting hoofs resounded in the town, taking the place of the angry chatter of the guns.

Dolan stared. "It's Colonel Dudley, from Fort Stanton, with two troops o' nigger cavalry!"

Boyle nodded. "And two Gatlin' guns and a wagon train!"

"Yeah, but what's it mean?" Charlie Hall demanded. "Do we throw up our hats and cheer, or do we run like hell?"

Andy Boyle chuckled. "Damned if I just know!"

Crisp and clear through the martial din a curt voice shouted, "Column—halt!" The column halted beside the McSween house. An orderly dismounted and trotted toward the house. He knocked and called: "Mr. McSween! Colonel Dudley's compliments, sir, and will you come out?"

A rasping voice followed: "Compliments, hell! You fool, the man's an outlaw!"

Dolan laughed aloud. "That was Dudley that said that!" he said. "Reckon now we know which side he's on!"

The door in the McSween house swung open slowly and McSween stepped out. Mrs. McSween walked beside him, clinging to his arm. Billy the Kid came next, with Kathie at his side. Then O'Folliard, Jim French, Doc Skurlock, Ygenio Salazar. One by one the little garrison filed out to stand beside McSween.

Colonel N. A. M. Dudley, Commandant at Fort Stanton, spoke loudly, his voice crisp with military dignity. "McSween," he said, "this lawlessness must cease immediately! Immediately, you understand?"

McSween's answer was full of deep bewilderment. "But I can't stop the fighting, Colonel Dudley! What can I do?"

"Do? Why, cease firing, of course!"

"I'll be glad to do that, Colonel, if you will stop the attack upon us! You see for yourself, sir, we are besieged! We are fighting for our lives! If you will protect us—"

Colonel Dudley shrugged impatiently. "You have your orders, McSween! Cease firing! I shall hold myself in readiness to punish any disobedience of those orders!"

DOLAN chuckled as he scrambled up. "Come on!" he whispered. "Andy, bring that can of oil!"

They darted forward, past the McSween barns, up to the rearmost wall of the McSween house itself. Andy Boyle slushed oil against the door, along the eaves. He leaned through a broken window and dashed the balance of the fuel about the room inside. Charlie Hall dropped his load of faggots beside the dripping door and struck a match. The flame caught with a throaty coming sound. Dolan caught up a stick and thrust it through the window. He stepped back,

blinking, as the oil-soaked room caught fire.

"That'll fix 'em!" he cried exultantly. "Come on! Let's go!"

In the street before the McSween house a bugle rang out sharply and the waiting column moved ahead.

Billy turned to Kathie, speaking barely above a whisper. "This is your chance to get out of this. Walk along beside the column; go to John Wilson's house. Mrs. McSween can go along."

She shook her head. "I don't want to go, Billy. I'd rather stay with you!"

He gripped her hand. "No, Kathie. We're comin' out of this all right, but—it worries me, you bein' here. Please go?"

She pressed closer, smiling bravely up at him. "All right, Billy . . . Goodby, my dear."

He took her in his arms and kissed her lightly, careless of the watching eyes. "*Vaya con Dios!*" he whispered. "That means—go with God!"

She smiled, but he saw the unshed tears that glistened in her eyes. She turned quickly, walking slowly through the swirling dust kicked up by the troopers' mounts.

The men stepped back through the bullet-splintered doorway of the McSween house. From the Murphy store a rifle cracked insolently, the bullet thudding into the panel of the door as it closed behind McSween.

O'Folliard, walking back toward his post, paused suddenly to sniff the air. "Some-thin' burnin'!" he said. "I smell smoke!"

Billy darted toward the rear of the house. The smell of smoke was acrid now, a thick hot stench. He jerked the last door open and slammed it tight again, coughing. The back room was a solid mass of flame.

O'Folliard cursed sharply once and fell silent. Mrs. McSween came past him, her eyes wide with fear.

Billy stard at her. "I thought you went with Kathie!" he said.

She shook her head. "My place is here!" she said. "What's happened?"

Billy shrugged. "The Murphy outfit sneaked up and fired the house! That back room is a blazin' furnace!"

As he spoke, a section of the back adobe wall, white-hot almost, cracked and buckled in. Its fall sent a wave of flame against the inner door and that too burst and fell away. Instantly, from behind the

house, Murphy riflemen sent a volley screaming through the gap.

Billy whirled, hustling Mrs. McSween out of the line of fire. "The wind's behind the fire, boys, and it'll take this side of the house as sure as hell! But maybe we can keep it from spreadin' into the other wing!"

In the front room of that west wing Mrs. McSween caught Billy's arm. "My piano!" she said. "We must save that!"

Billy laughed. "That's right!" he said. "We'll move it over to the other wing. Come on, boys! Grab hold and heave!"

They fell to with a will, laughing as they strained and struggled with the heavy instrument. A piece of sheet music fluttered to the floor and Billy stooped to pick it up. As he lifted it a rifle bullet smashed through a window just beside him, leaving a black hole in the paper in his hand. He showed it to Mrs. McSween.

"One of Murphy's boys is writin' in some new notes, ma'am."

They finished the task at last and Mrs. McSween thanked them almost tearfully.

"Play for us, won't you, ma'am?" Billy smiled. "I have heard gunfire that sounded like music to me, but this time it's gettin' sort of monotonous."

She sat down, her fingers brushing the keys caressingly. Old familiar tunes filled the house and floated out to other ears outside. The roof at the rear of the west wing fell with a mighty crash, but the music soared above the echoes of tragedy and went on and on.

"It's workin' forward awful fast," O'Folliard said. "Only the front room is left!"

Billy nodded and returned to the piano. "Play 'Silent Night'," he asked.

He stood beside her until the last notes died away. Tonight the flames would light the battlefield and the guns would never be silent.

CHAPTER XIII

The Last Stand

KATHIE started nervously as a heavy booming sound rolled up to her from the burning McSween house. A column of fire shot upward through the curtain of smoke. John Wilson, standing with Kathie at a window of his home, spoke reassuringly.

"I've been expectin' that. The fire may

die out now. They're not whipped yet; don't give up hope!"

Kathie nodded but her eyes were bleak with fear.

Wilson stiffened suddenly. "Good God! Look! They'll murder her!"

Kathie leaned forward breathlessly. The figure of a woman showed briefly through the whirling smoke in front of McSween's house and then was lost to view as the grayish cloud closed in.

"It's Mrs. McSween!" Kathie whispered. "Surely they won't shoot at her!"

Wilson spoke between clenched teeth. "I wouldn't bet on that!"

Mrs. McSween stepped out suddenly into the clear sunlight on the street. The rifles in the Murphy store spat out a rapid volley, barking like excited curs. Kathie saw white spurts of dust churned up by bullets striking thick about the figure in the road. Kathie cried out once, a choked thin sound. John Wilson reached out without turning and gripped her arm.

"The damned murderers!" he whispered. "Look! She's hit!"

Mrs. McSween had halted now and they saw her stoop deliberately. A bullet had kicked dust upon her dress and she brushed it off with quick housewifely hands. She stood erect again and moved ahead. The Murphy rifles fell silent finally and from somewhere far away a man laughed raucously. But there was a note of admiration in the sound.

Kathie whirled free of Wilson's grasp and darted to the door. Mrs. McSween turned, smiling, as Kathie called her name.

"No, child, I can't stop now. I'm going up to talk to Colonel Dudley."

"It won't do any good!" Kathie spoke breathlessly, clinging to the older woman's hand. "John Wilson talked to him. He said he wouldn't interfere! But I'll go with you."

She put her arm around Mrs. McSween's waist and they turned together toward the army camp. A colored orderly met them midway up the hill and flashed white teeth at them in a friendly grin. A coal-black sentry halted them at the outskirts of the camp. Mrs. McSween's voice was clear and calm.

"We've come to talk to Colonel Dudley, please."

"Yes, *ma'am!* You sho' was mighty brave, a-walkin' out in front o' all them guns like dat! I 'uz watchin' dat; yes, *ma'am!* You all jes' come with me."

They halted before a tent and the sentry stepped inside, announcing them. They heard Colonel Dudley's curt voice answering. Mrs. McSween stepped inside quickly and Kathie followed her. Dudley turned at the sound of their entrance.

He frowned as he recognized his guests. "Mrs. McSween, I believe? . . . Well? What can I do for you?"

"Colonel Dudley, I've come to beg you to stop this awful fighting! Regardless of which side you may believe is right, you surely can't intend to stand aside and watch while murder is being done!"

"It isn't considered murder, Madam, when an officer is forced to kill a criminal who resists arrest! I've already talked to Sheriff Peppin about this. The men in your house are outlaws. Billy the Kid, for instance—"

Kathie cut in then, speaking rapidly. "Billy is an outlaw, yes! An outlaw because, as an officer of the law, he killed two criminals who attempted to escape! I offer you your own argument, Colonel Dudley; it should be good enough to work both ways!"

The Colonel cleared his throat. "H'rumph! . . . I have no authority to interfere with a civil officer in pursuit of his obvious duty. . . . Yes, Corporal? What is it now?"

THE orderly shot a white-eyed look at them and stiffened to salute. "Mistuh Shuv-a is waitin', suh. My orders wuz to fotch him hyah, suh."

"Show him in!" Colonel Dudley smiled briefly. "You ladies may remain. This will convince you, perhaps, that my decision is final!"

Martin Chavez came in then, bobbing his head respectfully as he twisted a steepled dusty hat between his hands. Dudley's crisp voice cracked out at him.

"As you came into my camp, did you see those cannon?"

"*Si, senor.*"

"Well, they are trained on the Patron and Montana houses occupied by your men!" Colonel Dudley's tone was sharper now. "If those guns were fired your men would all be killed! What d'you think of that?"

"I think you make the joke, Colonel. You are here to protect us, not to kill us."

Dudley frowned. "Listen to me, Chavez! If any one of those houses fires another shot those Gatling guns will

tear both houses down! Get your men out of those houses and out of town! If you take any further part in the fighting, I'll send my troopers after you!"

Chavez glanced tragically at Mrs. McSween and lifted both his hands in the Latin gesture of helplessness. His men could not fight the United States Army!

Mrs. McSween stood speechless as Chavez's departing footsteps faded down the company street. When she did speak her voice was low and broken.

"Colonel Dudley, by ordering Chavez and his men out of Lincoln you have signed a death warrant for my husband and his friends. Since you have interfered in this affair, will you not give the men in *my* house, too, safe escort out of town?"

Dudley frowned, repeating once again his trite remark: "I have no authority, Madam, to interfere with civil authorities!"

Mrs. McSween's head lifted slowly and she spoke this time with stinging scorn. "Colonel Dudley, you have already interfered. You are encouraging the wholesale murder of my husband and his friends! Your action is a black disgrace upon the uniform you wear!"

Dudley took a swift step toward her. "Get out of my tent!" he shouted. "Orderly! Escort this woman out of the camp!"

Mrs. McSween faced him steadily. "I'll go," she said. "But so help me God, if I survive this massacre I will move heaven and earth if need be to see you punished and publicly shamed for your part in it!"*

She turned away then with Kathie beside her.

"I must go back and—tell them." Mrs. McSween's voice broke a little.

"Then I'll go too!" Kathie said quickly. "Billy made me leave. I didn't know, then, that there wasn't any—hope."

*Note: She kept this promise literally, pleading her case before Territorial Governor Lew Wallace, and finally appealing it to Washington. She filed a score of affidavits sworn to by actual witnesses. She forced the case to such lengths that Colonel Dudley finally asked for an official investigation. He was exonerated; but, as Walter Noble Burns says in his "Saga of Billy the Kid": "In arriving at its verdict the court seems to have lost sight of the human tragedy in weighing the niceties of military law."

"Yes." Mrs. McSween smiled wanly and took Kathie's hand. "We'd rather stand beside our men."

The men from the Patron and Montana houses were mounted now, riding slowly out of town. There was no firing as Kathie and Mrs. McSween walked down toward the burning house. They picked their way through choking clouds of smoke and it was Billy who opened the door for them.

"Kathie!"

SHE went to him swiftly, nestling in his arms. Behind them, Mrs. McSween spoke to her husband. "Colonel Dudley ordered Chavez to take his men away!" McSween caught her hands and patted them, soothing her.

"Kathie, darling!" Billy's voice was low, his lips pressed deep in Kathie's hair. "You shouldn't have come back, Kathie; but I'm glad you did! I—"

A bullet found a gap in the heat-crumpled wall and struck the piano with a jangling crash of sound. Mrs. McSween screamed sharply and stood trembling terribly. McSween's big hands held fast to hers. "There, mother! There, now, don't you cry . . ."

Kathie pressed her face against Billy's shoulder. Billy's voice was soothing, confident. "Shucks, honey, we're not licked, you know! Why, the fire's movin' slower already. Like as not it'll burn itself out."

"And if it doesn't?"

He chuckled then. "Well, then we'll have to make a run for it, that's all! But it'll be dark by then. We'd only have to cross a few yards lighted by the fire and then we'd be out of it."

Those few yards would be criss-crossed by the flames of spitting guns. He did not mention that, but Kathie knew. She refused to think of it just now.

"You'll need horses!" she cried. "Billy, if you have to leave the house. I'll have horses waiting for you across the creek!"

He bent swiftly and kissed her on the lips. "You're sweet!" he said. "But you must go now; you, too, Mrs. McSween. Don't make it harder for us by staying."

Mrs. McSween nodded. "I must get some clothing," she said. "You, too, Kathie. Your pretty dresses—we mustn't let them burn."

They were back soon, both laden with bundles. Billy walked beside Kathie to the door. "I—I wish you'd take my rifle, Kathie." She looked up at him swiftly

but he refused to meet her eyes. "You could wrap it in the dresses so it wouldn't be seen. I—I think a heap of it, you know; Tunstall's gift, and all. . . . Keep it for me, won't you, Kathie?"

"I'll take it, Billy, of course." A keep-sake, she thought, in case— She forced the thought aside. "I'll keep it till you come for it."

He said goodby to Kathie then, not touching her. His boyish smile flashed, like sunlight through a rift in lowering cloud. "Don't forget our date! I'll sure be there!"

She nodded, afraid to trust her voice. The two women stepped out quickly, stumbling once more through the whirling smoke, and Billy watched as long as he could see them. He turned then and forced a laugh.

"Well, back to work!" he said. "Dad Peppin thinks he's got us licked; but me, I'll bet a dinner to the crowd that we get out of this! Come on, you gamblin' men! Who's game?"

O'Folliard turned from a firing port to laugh with him. "It ain't a question of bein' game, Billy," he said. "Suppose I took that bet, and *won*; how the hell would I collect?"

IN THE Wilson house Kathie called her host aside. "How many horses can we get?" she asked.

He frowned. "I've only one here. And we can't go collectin' horses. Either we'd be stopped or Peppin's men would follow us and lay an ambush for the boys."

"I have it! Jess Wilder's place is just a few miles north. He's got horses; and Uncle Joe Flack is there to help bring them here!"

Wilson nodded. "But Peppin'd never let me leave town now!"

"Not you! Me!" Kathie caught Wilson's arm. "They won't stop me! Come on!"

She dragged him to the barn. "You better circle Dudley's camp," he advised as he saddled for her. "And—take this gun! If anybody tries to stop you, shoot first and give the roan his head!"

He handed her a snub-nosed forty-five and she mounted quickly. "I hate to let you go," Wilson said. "Maybe I—"

She smiled quickly. "Open the door!"

He swung the big door back and stepped aside. The roan went through, dancing as he fought the bit. Somewhere to the south a man yelled hoarsely and a rifle spat twice in rapid time. Wilson saw Kathie glance

back and then bend down above the saddle horn. She gave the roan his head and they swept from sight around the San Juan church.

Wilson stepped back, swinging the barn door shut. Before it closed a rider flashed across the stable-yard and fired cross-handed as he passed. The slug ripped splinters from the wall a foot from Wilson's head. He ducked; but in that fleeting glance he recognized the man.

"Bob Ollinger!" he whispered. "If that brute lays a hand on her—!" He shook his head. "But he'll never catch her! She's got the better horse and she's hardly half Bob's weight."

A man stepped past a corner of the San Juan church as Kathie came abreast of it and the roan sheered off in a sidelong leap. The man was James Dolan. Kathie sent the roan into an alleyway between two high-fenced fields. A shot cracked out and once again she heard the whine of lead.

But it was the sharp swift beat of hoofs that filled her with a desperate fear. She looked back. Her changed course behind the church had given Ollinger a needed break. He swung in close behind her after cutting off the angle of her turn and she saw him grin.

Ahead, the lane in which they rode was closed off by a gate. She wondered if the roan would jump; if she could ride him if he did. She heard Ollinger's exultant yell.

The big roan lunged ahead, lifting beneath her like a bird. "Why, it isn't hard!" she thought. She heard Ollinger's shout change into an oath. He was leaning forward in his saddle now, spurring his horse toward the barrier. It was not till then that Kathie remembered Wilson's gun.

She cocked it awkwardly, twisting in the saddle to take aim. But the motion of the horse made the gun a pendulum. She fired blindly just as Ollinger's horse lunged up. Her own mount leaped spasmodically, almost unseating her. But before she turned she had a glimpse of Ollinger's defeat. His straining mount seemed to collapse in mid-leap. She heard the crash of splintered timbers as horse and rider fell across the gate.

She was clear at last, outside the town, the roan running straight and strong between her knees.

SIX hours later, the men in the McSween house felt reluctantly before the

flames into the kitchen. It was their last retreat. Under cover of the gathering dark, the Murphy men were closing in.

Billy peeped out through a ragged bullet hole. A low adobe wall made a tiny courtyard there behind the house some thirty feet across. The ground was redly lighted now by the flickering radiance from the fire. Beyond the wall, darkness that meant safety if a man could get to it. Yonder, where the Bonita bumbled noisily along its stony bed, were hiding places in plenty—if a man could get that far!

But that thirty feet of brightly lighted court would be a fiends'-gauntlet of criss-crossing rifle fire from a score or more of guns behind the 'dobe walls.

The smoky kitchen was full of men. Billy found tobacco and papers and began to make a last cigarette.

"Well, we've still got a chance in a million, boys!" He had used that phrase a thousand times before but never quite so literally! "Yonder's thirty feet of hell, with safety on the other side of that adobe wall. . . . Who's goin' first?"

Harvey Morris and Francisco Semora were nearest him and both men stepped forward silently. Their faces were deathly white and Billy clapped them on the back encouragingly. "Good men!" he said. "Hit it when I open the door—and run like hell!"

He stepped forward, lifting the heavy bar that held the door in place. He leaped back swiftly, jerking the door in after him. Someone hidden by the wall yelled, "*Here they come!*" and his voice was shrill with eagerness.

CHAPTER XIV

Courtyard of Death

SEMORA went first, driving forward into the ruddy light. Morris followed him within a yard. A blast of rifle-fire blended with the yells of Murphy's henchmen as they bayed the kill. Both runners dropped midway across the yard.

Billy's face was grimly set. "Who's next?"

Vincente Romero plunged out without a word. The glare engulfed him and he dove headlong almost before he cleared the door. McSween stood up.

"It's me they want," he said. He lifted his hands and Billy saw a Bible there. "I'll

put my trust in this, Billy. You called me a traitor once. I've never been a traitor to my God!"

Billy thrust out his hand. "Will you shake hands with me, McSween?" he said. "We don't see alike about some things, but—you have my deep respect."

McSween nodded and smiled again. "Why, surely, Billy." He took Billy's hand and gripped it hard. "We've disagreed, but I respect you, too; your courage and your loyalty. I wish you well."

"Thanks, McSween. . . . Good luck!"

McSween stepped forward then into the glare, a tall gaunt figure, erect, unhurried, walking with a certain dignity. A rifle spat a shaft of vivid flame across the court and McSween halted suddenly. A dozen other guns roared in a concerted volley. McSween's body shook. He swayed forward slowly, falling like a stricken tree, full length.

A fiendish chorus of triumphant yells went up outside the walls. Rifles cracked spasmodically, shaking McSween's dead body with their cruel blows. But McSween was past their hatred now. His dead hands, clutching his blood-stained Bible to his breast, held fast in death as he had done in life to an unshaken faith.

Billy turned from the door and pulled deeply at his cigarette. A long moment passed before he dared to trust his voice.

"Next?"

O'Folliard shrugged and stepped forward. "One chance in a million was what you said, eh, Kid? Trouble is, there ain't a million of us here!"

He put out his hand and Billy took it in a brief hard grip. "So long, Tom. I was right about you, fellah! You made a hand!"

O'Folliard grinned and took a long deep breath, like a swimmer about to plunge into an icy sea. He sprang forward suddenly, through the door and out into the court. Without a glance to either side he ran swift and straight toward the outer wall. The rifles poured their hate in swift staccato beat but O'Folliard never paused. He reached the wall, dove headlong over it, was gone.

Billy was smiling as he turned this time. "You see it can be done!" he said. "Who's next?"

Doc Skurlock—Jose Chavez y Chavez—Jim French—Ignacio Gonzales; a steady stream of men. By some miracle all four got through.

Billy faced the last remaining man, Ygenio Salazar. "It must be easier than I thought!" he said. "You want to go first or last?"

Salazar shrugged. "I am ready, Billy. I go now."

"O. K.! *Vaya con Dios*, Salazar!"

The man plunged out, zigzagging like a frightened hare. He tripped midway and spun around, struck up by an invisible fist of lead. He fell loosely, face up. The score was even now.

Billy glanced at the cigarette he held between his finger tips. It was burned almost down. He lifted it, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. It had a pleasant taste.

Outside the house a man's voice lifted above the general pandemonium. "The Kid's the last one left! Get set for him!"

Billy grinned crookedly and hitched his gunbelts up a bit. He glanced through the door at the scene outside, fixing it in his mind. It would be fatal if he stumbled over one of those five bodies.

"One chance in a million! Well, here I go!"

HE PLUNGED out suddenly, both guns held high in readiness for chopping shots. A yell went up outside the wall. "There he comes! Get him! Get the Kid!"

This was the man they waited for; the man they wanted most of all. They stood up pumping lead. A salvo from a score of guns criss-crossed the narrow court with tongues of flame. "Kill him! Don't let him through!"

Through the whip-like clatter of the Winchester the deeper boom of Billy's Colts throbbed out a rapid, steady beat. He ran lightly, swiftly, threading a precarious way between the dead men on the ground and wielding death himself with either hand.

Bullets whined and snapped about him like swarming bees. He glimpsed the face of Old Man Pearce, Dad Peppin's right-hand man, scowling above the barrel of a gun. Billy's left Colt spoke and Pearce jerked back, the lobe of one ear torn away. Yonder was Bob Beckwith, member of the Tunstall posse, churning bullets from a hot carbine. Billy sidestepped, planting one foot deftly between Vincente Romero's sprawling legs, and chopped his right gun down. Beckwith toppled forward to hang across the 'dobe wall, a bullet in his brain.

He was nearly through now. The wall was just a step or two ahead. A man's

head thrust up behind a leveled gun. John McKinney! Billy recognized the neatly waxed mustache. McKinney yelled and fired hastily, startled by Billy's nearness. Billy's shot was instantaneous and McKinney reeled back, struck squarely in the mouth.

Only thirty feet! Twelve steps, perhaps. Yet it seemed a lifetime since he left that door! A lifetime filled with the bedlam of spitting guns. It seemed to him that he himself had fired a score of shots!

A bullet grazed his eyes, half-blinding him with its heated breath. He whipped one gun down, surprised to feel it rock in prompt recoil. He had thought it must be empty long ago!

The wall at last! He put out one hand, vaulting into a wall of velvet black. In mid-air he brushed the shoulder of a man and lashed out at it with his gun. He landed running; stumbled once, half fell, lurched up and darted on.

The guns were silent now, but Billy's ears still throbbed with sound. Through that pounding surf he heard men's oaths like the angry barking of disappointed dogs whose prey has dodged the kill. His body shook with harsh, sobbing laughter and he clenched his jaws, steadying himself. One chance in a million! Well, he had won! Just ahead the dark coverts of the Bonita's banks offered certain sanctuary. Murphy's killers would never dare search for him in the dark. It would be like searching, blindfolded, for a rattlesnake!

Somewhere nearby a soft voice spoke his name. "Billy! It's me—Joe Flack."

Billy relaxed. "All right, Uncle Joe." A friendly hand clutched Billy's arm. "Dog-gone, I'm glad t' see yuh, Kid! I got a horse for yuh across the creek."

They slipped down through the darkness and across the stream.

Life, freedom, friends, a horse! "I'm mighty grateful for all this! I don't know how to thank you."

"Thank Kathie!" the old man chuckled. "Kathie came a-bustin' into Jess Wilder's this afternoon. We couldn't find but nine broncs besides these two me and Jess was ridin'. Funny, though; nine was just enough t' go round!"

"Nine? But only five men besides myself got across the wall!"

"That's right; but Charlie Bowdre and George Coe and Hendry Brown had made it to John Wilson's barn."

Bowdre, Coe and Brown. They had been

in the McSween store. "Funny that I should have forgotten them!" Billy thought. But during those last hours the little group in the McSween house had been shut fast inside a separate world; a fiery, dwindling world from which they had no hope of escape except by way of death. Affairs outside that world had been very vague and far away and terribly unreal.

THEY mounted and the extra height gave them a view across the creek. The fire-lit court stood out with startling clarity. It swarmed now with the Murphy men, milling crazily around the corpses on the ground. Bottles glinted in the firelight as they drank. A dozen men joined hands and weaved in and out in a saturnalian dance among the dead.

Billy shuddered and turned away. "If I had my rifle," he said, "I'd give 'em music to dance by!"

They rode forward a little way and Billy drew rein again. "You go ahead to Wilder's, Uncle Joe," Billy told him quietly. "Kathie's got my rifle and— Hell, Joe! I want Kathie to know I got away!"

Billy turned and rode slowly down toward the eastern end of town, careful to avoid the soldier encampment there. He hid his horse behind the Wilson barn, and knocked lightly at a kitchen door. It opened a very little.

"Who's there?" Wilson called.

"Billy. Let me in!"

He stepped in swiftly. There was a little rush of swishing skirts and a low sweet cry and Kathie was in his arms, clinging to him, kissing him with a wild passion that was new and strange.

He held her fiercely. For the first time now he felt the fear of death. If those bullets had had their way with him he would have missed—this!

She pulled away from him suddenly, her moist eyes searching him as one looks at things not more than half believed. Kathie took his hat, touching it here and there with small quick movements. She reached out and touched his sleeve—his shirt. He glanced down and saw for the first time how closely death had passed him by. His shirt was ripped and torn, slashed in a dozen places as if by knives. Four slugs had struck his steepled hat. The holsters that now held his guns, empty when he crossed the yard, were cut and frayed. There was a straight black mark on one bootleg, as if a branding iron had touched and seared.

Deep laughter welled up in him. A moment ago he had felt a fear of death. Never again! Death had laid its hands upon him and let him go!

They were conscious suddenly of the others. Mrs. McSween reached out, touching Billy's arm, as her eyes searched his face.

"He is—dead?" she said. It was hardly a question. Her voice was flat, almost expressionless.

Billy nodded slowly. "No man could die more bravely, ma'am," he said. "He said goodby and walked out to face the guns. . . It was mighty brave."

She turned away, moving stiffly like one who walks in sleep. "It was murder!" she said distinctly.

There was a little silence. John Wilson wrung Billy's hand.

"How many of you got away, Billy?" he asked.

Billy told briefly of that desperate dash.

"I got two, maybe three, as I crossed the yard. Beckwith and McKinney—I'm sure of them. I hit old Man Pearce, too, but maybe not so very bad."*

There was a little silence, broken only by Mrs. McSween's renewed sobbing. Then Billy spoke again. "I'd better be goin'," he said. "They might stumble on my horse. Will you get my rifle for me, Kathie?"

She was gone but a moment, returning with the rifle in her arms. Her face was very pale. A miracle had given Billy back to her alive and now he would go out again into a darkness alive with threat.

"I'll go to South Spring, I think," she said, smiling gallantly. "Come to me there."

"I'll see you at Chisum's within a week," he promised. He jerked the door open suddenly and stepped outside. Her soft voice followed him: "*Vaya con Dios, Billy!*"

*Note: As a matter of fact, John McKinney did not die. Billy's bullet struck his jaw and glanced, carrying away part of that mustache of which he was so proud. Bob Beckwith, however, was killed instantly; and Old Man Pearce carried the mark of Billy's bullet in his ear until he died. Three hits, all made in the few short seconds while he sprinted thirty feet through a storm of singing lead! . . . Not less than fifty shots were fired at him, each one aimed with bitter hate by an expert marksman; but Billy was not hit. . . . It seems incredible, but it is true.

CHAPTER XV

Reunion

BILLY reached the Wilder place near dawn and the little cabin showed no light, but a voice challenged him and a sudden shout went up as he spoke his name. Men surged around him as lights flashed up in the house. Tom O'Folliard hovered close to Billy, grinning at him and mauling him now and then to make sure he was real.

"Boy!" he said, "I thought I was rid o' you and here you are again! Did you see me dive across that wall? I says to myself, 'Tom, yonder's the good ol' swimmin' hole and the last one in is a niggah baby!' and I let loose all holts and flew!"

Billy chuckled. "Yeah, I stepped in the ditch you dug with your nose and like to broke my leg!"

O'Folliard stared at him reprovingly. "Why, you must've been in somethin' of a hurry, and not lookin' where you stepped. You wasn't scared, was you, Billy?"

A shout of laughter shook the room. It was good to laugh again; good to forget the specter of death that had stalked them all throughout the last three days.

But one by one they succumbed to sheer fatigue and throughout that day the Wilder house was littered with inert bodies wrapped in blankets and in sleep.

They rode to Fort Sumner that night, Billy and Tom O'Folliard and Charlie Bowdre and Doc Skurlock, and they found themselves welcomed as heroes. Martin Chavez greeted them with boisterous joy.

"Ygenio Salazar escaped, Billee!" Chavez gripped Billy's arm and shouted through the buzz of talk.

Billy stared at him, "Salazar? That can't be true, Chavez! Why, man, I saw him die!"

Chavez nodded, grinning. "*Si!* He is hit three times, that Salazar, but he ees not dead! He lie verree still, like dead, *sabe Usted?* He ees very bad hurt but still he knows he does not wish to die and so—he ees still! When you are gone those Peppin men come into the court and sing and dance and get very drunk, and one time Andy Boyle pick Salazar up by the belt and shake him and put a gun in Salazar's ear to blow out hees brain; but somebody calls to him and he forgets to shoot! So when those murderers are gone, Salazar crawls away!"

Billy gripped Chavez's hand and wrung it hard. "Why that's great, Chavez!"

A towering figure loomed beside him in the crowd. It was Pat Garrett and Billy reached out to touch the big man's arm.

"Hi, Texas man!" he said.

Garrett turned, grinning. "Hi, Billy! I'm mighty glad you're still in the land of the livin', Kid. I've got some news for you." He bent low, whispering. "Major Murphy is dead! Died two days ago in a Sante Fe hospital. I just heard it."

"The hell!" A slow, impish grin broke over Billy's face. "I hope you're not expectin' me to mourn?"

"Not exactly. I—" Garrett made an awkward, depreciating gesture. "I was just wonderin'—what you aimed to do, now that the war is over?"

"Is it over?" he asked meaningly.

Garrett laughed. "They're still fightin' the Civil War around the cracker-barrel in every country store. But most of the boys'll tire of fightin' now that there's nobody to pay 'em wages for it."

Billy nodded. "You're right, of course."

"You see that sign?" Garrett turned, pointing. "I bought that restaurant a while back. I own a half interest in the general store yonder, too, in partnership with Beaver Smith. And—I'm figurin' on openin' up a saloon and gamblin' place, besides."

He leaned close again, speaking confidentially. "I'm goin' to amount to somethin' in this country, Billy! With your reputation and all, I could keep the gamblin' nice and orderly. How'd you like to throw in with me?"

"Sounds sort of good, Pat." Billy's tone was thoughtful. "Of course, I've sort of planned to tackle the cattle business. I'll think it over and let you know—"

HE paused suddenly, staring at a man who came toward him through the crowd. "Step aside, Pat," Billy said, curtly. O'Folliard, too, caught the tone of that command, if not the words, and whirled swiftly, leaving a sentence hanging in mid-air.

The man who caused this little stir came to a halt. It was Jesse Evans. Sight of him recalled to Billy's mind flat statements as flatly denied that Evans had been a member of the Tunstall posse. Evans' greeting now was friendly enough.

"Howdy, Kid. Long time no see."

"Howdy." Billy's answer was noncom-

mittal. "Jess, they tell me that you was with the boys that downed Tunstall. Is that right?"

"That's a damn lie, Billy. Why, I was here in Fort Sumner all that day! Garrett can tell you—"

Billy spoke without removing his gaze from Evans' face. "That right, Pat?"

Garrett's answer came instantly. "That's Gospel truth, Billy. Jess was here as late as noon that day, anyway."

Billy stepped forward instantly then, shaking Evans' hand. "I'm glad of that, Jess," he said simply.

Evans flushed with quick pleasure. "I—I've trailed along with some of the boys that was sidin' with Murphy, Kid, because they was my friends. They still are, some of 'em; but so are you! And I've never smoked a gun on either side."

"I ain't holdin' a grudge against *all* the men I've fought! How're things?"

"Good. Not havin' you holdin' cards against me here of late, I've done real well! Speakin' of grudges, keep your eye on Bob Ollinger. I heard this mornin' Ollinger swore he'd kill you for downin' his sidekick, Bob Beckwith."

Billy nodded. "Thanks. . . . Jess, I want you to meet another friend of mine, Tom O'Folliard."

Bowdre and Skurlock joined them there and the evening was begun. It lasted late as such reunions should and the quartet from Wilder's spent the night in town.

Billy wakened first and stepped outside, pausing to roll a cigarette. The morning was fine and clear. Yonder, between the general store and a neighboring saloon, he caught a glimpse of the Pecos glimmering in the sun. A man crossed the street toward him and halted, holding out his hand.

"Howdy, Billy. Hear you had a lively battle down in Lincoln day before yesterday."

"Why, yes," Billy's hand lifted a little, hesitated. "But—you've got the advantage of me, sir."

"What? Why, I'm Pete Maxwell! You ain't forgot the night I rode into your camp up on the Canadian! You had meat and was hankerin' for coffee, and I had coffee and no meat, so we pitched in together. I thought you'd remember me. It wasn't more than a month ago."

Billy put his cigarette between his lips, freeing his left hand before his right went out to meet Maxwell's hearty clasp. "I'm

glad to know you, Mr. Maxwell," he said, "But—I never shared a camp with you on the Canadian or anywhere else! I haven't been that far north in three-four months; and I never forget a man I've met."

Pete Maxwell stared at him for a moment, unbelievably. He lifted his hand at last, scratching his head. "Now I've had a second look at you," he said, "I can see that you're right! This feller I met up on the Canadian had buck teeth; not very noticeable, but not like yours. He sure was a ringer for you, though! And he said he was you! Come to think of it, his voice was different too. Sort of Mexican twist to it. But I sure never doubted him at the time! I was over there in the store and Beaver Smith pointed you out and said, 'There's Billy the Kid,' so I came over to shake your hand and renew acquaintance-ship. I wasn't just tryin' to fake a meetin' with you!"

Billy grinned pleasantly. "No reason why you should do that, I reckon," he said. "Anyway, I'm real pleased to meet you. I've heard about you, naturally. John Chisum's spoken of you many times."

"Don't you believe all that old horse-thief says about me, though!" Maxwell laughed in a way that took the sting out of his words. But he returned at once to the subject uppermost in his mind. "I can't get over the way that Jasper fooled me!" he said. "Lookin' close, of course, I can see plenty of little differences. His hair was darker than yours, for one thing; and his eyes were brown where yours are grey. But he was your size and shape and at a glance he looked a heap like you. If I ever see that Jasper again I'll give him a piece of my mind for foolin' me! . . . Well, I'm glad to 've met you, anyway. Give Chisum my regards."

"I'll do that, sir," Billy smiled and Maxwell turned away, walking down the street.

BILLY struck a match and lighted his smoke before he crossed the street toward the general store. Odd that some one should have used his name, he thought. Odd, too, that anyone should look like him.

Billy shrugged the thought aside and gave himself over with a certain enthusiasm to the consideration of new clothes. He'd be going to see Kathie soon and he'd fix himself up accordingly!

It was not until noon when he dropped into Garrett's restaurant for dinner that he

met his friends. They greeted his splendor with derisive shouts.

They rode out of town together that afternoon, the five of them, heading south toward Wilder's. Pat Garrett's parting reminder repeated itself again and again in Billy's mind as they jogged along. "Don't forget, Billy, I've got a place for you."

Kathie might object to his joining Garrett as a combination gambler and gunman, for that was what it amounted to, really. Yet his guns would discourage rowdyism. He would be a sort of unofficial peace officer, in fact.

They reached Wilder's in good time and Billy came to a decision that had been in his mind all day. "I'm not stoppin', boys," he said. "Reckon I'll ride on south and hit Chisum's place tomorrow sometime."

"Now, I wonder," O'Folliard drawled, "if Miss Haskel went to South Spring ranch today?"

Billy flushed and grinned.

"I'm goin' with you," Evans chuckled. "I'm on my way to Lincoln anyway and I'll ride that far with you."

It was like old times, riding with Evans again. They had disagreed, of course; squabbled a lot of times over many things; but they had been good friends in spite of that. They rode in silence for some time, not hurrying. Evans spoke at last, a little hesitantly. "Last time we had a talk," he said, "you made it real plain to me that rustlin' cows was out o' your line."

Billy glanced aside at him. "I'm plannin' on gettin' married, Jess," he said quietly. "Rustlin' beef ain't a real good business for a married man!"

Evans shrugged. "Miss Kathie, eh? I expected that. . . . But you'll be needin' a stake, won't you? You know that Murphy's dead. He died broke, or close to it; mortgaged to the hilt gettin' money to pay his fightin' men. There's an awful lot of Murphy beef that'll be sort of orphaned, so t' speak. A lot o' them Murphy cows belonged to Chisum once. I reckon Chisum wouldn't mind payin' maybe five bucks a head to get 'em back, would he? You couldn't call *that* rustlin', could you?"

"Jess, you ought to be a jack-leg lawyer!" Billy laughed at Evans' quick discomfiture but there was no reproof in his tone as he went on. "I'm not sayin' I'd turn down a deal like that, Jess, if it was only me. But—Kathie'd call it stealin' . . . And—you won't have any trouble gettin' all the help

you need if you want to go ahead with it."

They left it there but Evans was disappointed and a little hurt.

CHAPTER XVI

Governor and Outlaw

PEACE followed McSween's and Murphy's deaths, but it was a precarious peace. Hatreds born in powder smoke and blood die hard, and Lincoln County held its breath in fear and trembling lest some careless word fan life once more into the smouldering embers of the feud.

John Chisum alone of all the leaders in the Lincoln County war survived almost untouched. But he felt the McSween tragedy deeply. "Every dollar and every man I had would have backed McSween," he was telling Billy. "It was only the fortunes of war that left me out of the actual fighting. If I could only have known that you boys were trapped in the McSween house—" -

"I wanted to send for you but McSween said no. You're not to blame." Billy's tone was utterly sincere and Chisum nodded gratefully.

"But it's no use frettin' over what might have been. What I'm comin' to is this: I got you into this, in a way. Outside of what little wages you got from Tunstall, you've put in nearly a year without pay." He grinned a little. "I ain't even caught you collectin' on that permit I gave you to rustle Long Rail beef."

Billy grinned. "I've been too busy to work at it, sir."

Chisum nodded. "So suppose I hand you a check for five hundred now and call it square?"

"Why, that's mighty fine of you. But look, Chisum. You keep your check and give me its equivalent in heifer calves, will you? Have your boys brand K I D on five hundred dollars' worth of heifers and let them run with your stuff till I call for them and I'll give you a share of the increase for their keep. How's that?"

Chisum chuckled. "Strangest thing I ever heard, Billy: a gamblin' man choosin' property in place of cash! I see Kathie's hand in that, all right!" He sobered then. "I'll do it, Kid. With your brains and a girl like that to help you, there's no limit to how far you can go!"

Billy flushed a little. "Right now,

though," he said, "I'm an outlaw with a price on my head—'Dead or Alive!'"

But Chisum brushed that aside as a mere detail. "I'm leavin' soon now for Sante Fe to see Governor Wallace. You lay low till I get back and your outlaw days are over!"

The following weeks were quite happy ones for Kathie and The Kid. Lincoln had no more need for a school but Fort Sumner grasped the chance to get Kathie's services. So it was natural that Billy should make Fort Sumner his headquarters.

Kathie and Pete Maxwell and Billy were seated together on the porch of Maxwell's house one afternoon when John Wilson came up.

"Chisum's back with Governor Wallace," Wilson burst out almost before the greetings were complete. "Wallace offers amnesty to all men outlawed by the Lincoln County war and—he wants to see you, Billy, in Lincoln tomorrow afternoon!"

Kathie caught at Billy's arm, crying out softly with sudden joy. "Billy! Oh, it's come true after all! Amnesty—that means full pardon!"

The word made Billy frown. "Pardon? What have I done to be pardoned for? It's no crime to fight in self-defense, is it? Nothin' but crooked politics made me an outlaw at all!"

Wilson nodded. "I reckon the Governor is takin' the only way there is to put you in the clear. You'll go and talk to him, won't you?"

Billy nodded slowly. "Yes, I'll go, of course."

"Of course!" Kathie bubbled over with delight.

But he was not convinced. No official amnesty could quench those hatreds. Bob Ollinger, for example, would hardly forget his oath of personal revenge because of any public peace.

He was still uneasy, still filled with a vague foreboding, when he entered Lincoln on the following day. He halted at the hitching rack of the Ellis House and stepped down. The town was very still. He knew, subconsciously, that he was the center of a drama, the meeting of a Territorial Governor and a wanted man in formal conference.

He paused, rifle in hand, at the foot of the steps leading up to the Ellis House. The group above him had risen now, awaiting him. There were gold-laced uniforms up there, stiffly erect and trim. There was

John Chisum, dressed in his Sunday best for once! And there was Juan Patron, dressed in black as for a funeral.

Billy climbed the steps. John Chisum came forward, his hand outstretched, and Billy took it gravely. "Gentlemen, this is my friend, William Bonney—Billy the Kid. Billy, this is Governor Wallace."

They faced each other for a moment silently. On the one hand, Governor Lew Wallace—scholar, diplomat, and cultured gentleman; on the other, the fastest gunman in the whole Southwest! In appearance alone the contrast was a striking one. Governor Wallace was a man past middle age, iron grey of hair and beard but soldierly erect, and distinguished product of the drawing room.

The Kid was not yet past his teens, slender, beardless, boyishly handsome—the product of a raw frontier. He had dressed in honor of this occasion and he matched the Governor's tailored elegance with spruce new cowboy garb. Only the rifle in his hands and the guns in their leather holsters at his hips marked him for what he was: a deadly fighting man. Except for them he seemed a pleasant, friendly boy.

There was a friendly twinkle in the Governor's eyes as he put out his hand. "So you are Billy the Kid!" he said.

Billy took the proffered hand and smiled. "That's what they call me, sir."

"Well, now!" The Governor smiled quite frankly now. "You don't look like a bold, bad desperado, Billy! . . . Sit down?"

Billy sat down, balancing the Mannlicher across his knees. "You can't always judge a man by what you hear," he said. "Nor by the way he looks, either, I reckon."

The Governor nodded. "In other words, you may not be as bad as people say you are nor yet as harmless as you look, eh?" He chuckled softly. "You don't intend to sail under false colors, do you? . . . Nor do I! President Hayes sent me out here to put a stop to the Lincoln County war. I've come here today to ask you to help me."

He paused and Billy waited. He liked this man instinctively but—what did Wallace expect of him?"

"A mutual friend of ours," Governor Wallace glanced at Chisum and smiled as he faced the Kid again, "tells me you have a fine sweet girl waiting to be your wife. I want you to stop fighting, Billy, and marry this fine girl of yours and—settle down. Will you do that?"

"That's what I aim to do, sir."

"I'm issuing a proclamation of amnesty to every man who participated in the feud. That amnesty applies to you, Billy, if you will accept its terms. . . . You're willing to stop fighting, aren't you?"

Billy nodded and grinned. "We offered to stop fightin', sir, when Colonel Dudley brought his soldiers here! But the Murphy men kept shootin' at us!"

"I realize that, of course. But the situation is changed now. You can surrender to me personally, under my positive guarantee of protection."

"Surrender?" Billy stiffened slightly. "Look here, sir, why put this up to me like this? I didn't start this war! The Murphy outfit started it by killin' Tunstall! I swore I'd kill every man that had a part in that, it's true. I haven't done so bad either, even if some of them are still alive! But it's cost me other friends to do it. I'm willin' to call a halt if they are. But—why pick on me as the first to quit?"

"Because you are the leader, Billy!"

Billy shrugged skeptically. "What do you want me to do?"

"Surrender to me and stand trial before a court of law! If you are acquitted I will be the first man to congratulate you and wish you well. If you are convicted, I promise you before these witnesses that I will give you a full, free and instant pardon! All I will ask of you is your promise not to carry arms again and to do your best to keep the peace."

Billy's eyes widened. "Why, Governor, a promise like that would be the same as signin' my own death warrant! The minute I stepped out of that court without my guns I'd be shot!"

"I don't believe that, Billy. As I understand the code out here, an unarmed man will not be molested if he keeps the peace. Look at Chisum here."

Billy smiled crookedly. "Chisum never killed a man," he said tersely. "I've killed six since Tunstall's death six months ago! There are fifty men in Lincoln County alone who would rather shoot me down than eat a good square meal! Yonder are four of them, right across the street!" He nodded toward the Murphy store.

"Perhaps that's true; but they didn't do it because they didn't dare! Lincoln today is in the hands of organized law."

Billy shook his head stubbornly. "You're wrong, Governor," he said flatly. "Old

Man Pearce over there ain't afraid of your soldiers! He's a deputy sheriff. I'm a wanted criminal. He learned from Colonel Dudley that soldiers won't bother a civil officer on behalf of men like me. The reason Pearce and Peppin and Dolan and Boyle don't take a shot at me is right here on my knees!" He patted the rifle emphatically. "I rode in with it balanced on my saddle horn, and the muzzle pointin' straight at them and they knew if they made a funny move I'd kill them before they reached their guns! It'll be balanced on my saddlehorn when I ride out of here, too—reversed to point their way again!"

"I think you're wrong, Billy."

Billy stood up, lifting his shoulders in a little shrug. "There's no use arguin' about it, sir," he said. "I'll stand trial if you say so, provided I'm not asked to make a promise afterward that would mean my death. For I'll tell you now, sooner or later I'll meet one of those men who mean to kill me and I'll either have to kill or be killed. Chisum there will tell you that I'm right."

Governor Wallace stood up a little wearily. "If that is true, Billy," he said, "I could take you to Sante Fe for trial and afterward you could go to another country among people who are not your sworn enemies and make a new clean start."

Billy's jaw set firmly as he shook his head. "I had a right to come here," he said. "I've never run from any man or any thing, and I'm not beginnin' now! I like it here and I aim to stay!"

"As an outlaw, Billy?"

Billy shrugged. "If my record ain't so bad but what you're willin' to promise me a pardon if I'm convicted, there's no sense in my bein' an outlaw, is there? If you can do that you can cancel the charges against me!"

"I can't do that unless you promise to lay down your arms. I'm sorry, Billy. I believe you have the makings of a splendid man and a useful citizen. I hate to see you go the way you're headed now."

"I'm sorry too, Governor. But if I accepted the terms as you've laid them down I'd be a dead citizen! . . . Good day, sir. Thanks for talkin' it over with me, anyway." He glanced at Chisum as he turned and smiled a friendly smile. He dropped a hand on Juan Patron's arm as he passed. "So long, Juan," he murmured.

He paused briefly at the top of the stairs, adjusting his tall white hat upon his head.

Across the street the four men on the porch of the Murphy store watched him, motionless. He smiled slightly, dropped the Mannlicher into the crook of his arm and walked lightly down the steps. He untied his horse, turning the pony so that his face might be toward the Murphy store as he mounted.

He laid the rifle across the saddle bow and swung up gracefully, barely disturbing the weapon's aim. The horse lunged out, fought the tightened reins a moment and then moved westward at a rocking walk. The padded sound of his hoofs reechoed in the silent town. The boy in the saddle sat erect and motionless, intensely conscious of the scores of eyes that followed him, yet seemingly aloof.

Governor Wallace turned to Chisum and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Chisum. But this was the turning point for him, and he's made the wrong choice."

Chisum nodded sorrowfully. "He told you the truth, Governor, when he said his enemies would kill him if he gave up his guns; but—it was foolish, boyish stubbornness that made him refuse to leave New Mexico. That was his chance. I wish he had taken it!"

CHAPTER XVII

Outlaw in Earnest

"BUT, Billy, I simply cannot understand. I don't believe you *want* to be anything but an outlaw!" Kathie had gone from amazed dismay to tears and from tears to anger. The disappointment was almost more than she could bear.

"I'd rather be an outlaw than a dead man, Kathie. I tell you, he asked me to promise that I'd leave off my guns!"

"Well? Do you *want* to go on killing?"

"Kathie, do you want me murdered like Tunstall?"

"But you wouldn't be! He offered you a trial in Sante Fe and safe conduct out of New Mexico!"

"I won't be driven out!" Billy's jaw was set again doggedly.

"Oh, I could—I could almost hate you for this!"

Billy stiffened and his face turned very white. "You don't mean that, Kathie?"

Kathie's face too was white with anger. She had builded so hopefully on the Gov-

ernor's help, had suffered so many bitter night-long agonies of fear.

"I *do* mean it!" she said. "If you loved me you couldn't—"

He bent over her, fumbling for her hands. "I do love you, Kathie! Why, honey, I'd do anything on earth for you—"

She drew back from him, flinging his hands aside. "Except the one simple thing that would make you fit to come to me!" she blazed.

He drew back as from a blow. "Meanin' that I'm not—fit—now?" he said stiffly.

"Are you? An outlaw, with a price on your head? 'Wanted, Dead or Alive!' I suppose you think I'd be happy seeing your picture and those words staring at me everywhere I went!"

"You're makin' it real plain to me," he said slowly.

She stared at him, a little appalled at the deathly pallor of his face. His eyes were veiled now, cold, expressionless. His hands clenched until the skin across the knuckles seemed about to burst. They relaxed slowly. He closed his right hand over the fingers of his left hand and removed her ring; laid it on the table.

"I'll be goin' now," he said. His voice was low, a monotone. "I reckon I won't be troublin' you again."

He walked out into the August sunlight, head up, staring straight ahead through dazed unseeing eyes.

He crossed to Garrett's restaurant and halted at the door.

"I need a drink, Pat," he said. "I need a lot of drinks! You better come along."

"You and Kathie have a fight?"

"You guessed it, Pat." They reached the bar and Billy turned, smiling with his lips. "Name your poison, Pat. I'm buyin'."

"Bourbon."

"Make it two."

"Shucks, Kid! What's a fight between two kids in love? She'll get over it in a day or two and so will you!"

Billy downed his drink and made a face over it. "Maybe you're right, Pat," he said slowly.

"Sure, I'm right! Leave her alone to think it over some. She'll come around! . . . I'll tell you! O'Folliard and the boys are at the old nester's shack northeast of Wilder's. Let's go out there and visit 'em; play a little poker, maybe? Time we get back here Kathie'll welcome you."

Billy's eyes narrowed slightly. "What're they doin' out there?" he asked slowly.

Garrett shrugged. "Well, some of the boys pulled out with Jess Evans. Yesterday, O'Folliard hit town, bought a lot o' grub, paid me fifty I loaned him and said they was sort o' layin' low for a while. At a guess, I'd say they'd maybe turned a little cattle deal."

Billy nodded. "Rustlin', eh? Doggone that Evans! He's a friend of mine but he's got too many ideas! . . . All right, let's go! I'll gamble those jaspers out of some of their ill-gotten gains and teach 'em a lesson! I can put the money to good use!"

It was four days later when he rode into Fort Sumner again with money in his pockets and O'Folliard and Garrett at his side.

They reined up in front of Maxwell's house and Billy waved the others on. He chuckled and swung down, anticipating Kathie's welcome.

The door opened before Billy knocked and he halted, sweeping off his hat. "Why, Mrs. McSween," he said, "I didn't expect to see you here . . ."

He paused, sobering instantly at sight of Mrs. McSween's face. "Why, ma'am, what's wrong? Is Kathie here? Is she—sick?"

"She's sick, Billy; heartsick. . . . She won't see you."

"Won't see me?" Billy repeated the phrase incredulously.

"Billy, I came up here to talk to Kathie and tell her not to let you go. I think she was convinced, Billy—until we heard yesterday about what happened out at Blazer's Mill. I can't plead for you any more, Billy; not after that."

"Blazer's Mill? Why, what do you mean, Mrs. McSween? I don't understand—"

The door behind Mrs. McSween burst open and Kathie stood there, her eyes blazing above cheeks streaked with tears. "But I understand, *now!*" she said. "No wonder you wouldn't give up your guns! You'll need them—as a cattle thief!"

"But, Kathie! Cattle thief? Somebody's lied to you, Kathie! Maybe Evans and some of the boys have picked up a few head here and there—I wouldn't say about that; but not me! And I haven't been near Blazer's Mill—"

"Since you killed Joe Bernstein there three days ago! Don't lie to me, Billy! You've hurt me enough without that! I—I never want to see you again! *Never!*"

She was gone then, leaving him only the

memory of her eyes suddenly wet with tears as she turned away from him.

Pete Maxwell sat at the counter in Pat Garrett's restaurant when Billy entered it, but Billy hardly glanced at him.

"Pat," he said, "what's this about me killin' a man named Bernstein down at Blazer's Mill?"

Garrett frowned. "Maxwell was just tellin' me, Billy," he said. "They're tellin' here in town that you and two other men was roundin' up some horses not far from Blazer's Mill and Bernstein, the Indian Agency clerk down there, rode out and yelled at you to stop. And the story is that you shot him! He was alive when somebody got to him and he swore it was you. He died before they could get him to the Mill."

Maxwell spoke then, gruffly. "You had a nerve, Kid, comin' here like this!"

Billy's anger flamed swiftly and the expression in his eyes as he turned startled Maxwell with a chill fear. "Don't tell me what to do, Pete!" he said. And then, to Garrett: "When was this supposed to be?"

"The day after we left town, Billy."

"But I was playin' poker all that day! You know that, Pat!"

Garrett spoke gently. "I believe you, Billy; but you're forgettin' somethin'. I went down to Wilder's place that day; didn't get back till nearly dark."

Billy nodded. "That's right, too. . . . But—O'Folliard; Bowdre—any of the boys will tell you . . ."

It was Maxwell who answered him. "O'Folliard is said to've been one of the two men with you at Blazer's Mill," he said. "He wouldn't be a very good witness, I'm afraid!"

Billy stood motionless for a moment, and they saw the boy's eyes change slowly, turning bleak and hard. He nodded at last. "Okay!" he said, very low. "I've been a fool, I reckon; but—not any more! . . . So long, Pat. Be seein' you."

He turned, walking out without another word. Pat Garrett shook his head. "That's too damn bad," he said. "He didn't do it, Pete. Yet my evidence won't do him any good. To get to Blazer's Mill that day would have meant hard ridin'. Horses and men would both have shown the marks of it. I never saw a sign, or heard a word, that night."

"I'm glad to hear you back him up. Some-

body else over at my house will be glad, too, I reckon. I'd better go and talk to her."

TO BILLY, this new trouble was a stunning blow. He had never so much as seen Bernstein. What motive could the man have had for naming Billy as his murderer? Or was it a mistake on Bernstein's part? And Kathie—Kathie might at least have given him a chance to deny the charge.

He found O'Folliard at a nearby bar. "We're leavin' town!" he said curtly.

"Leavin'? Say, we just got here!"

"Don't argue with me, Tom!" Billy's voice was sharply edged. "The story's goin' around town that I killed a man down at Blazer's Mill three days ago. We'd better drift!"

O'Folliard started to speak, thought better of it and tossed the drink down. Once mounted, Billy set a rapid pace. O'Folliard found his voice at last.

"Hell, Kid, they can't make that story stick! You was playin' cards with us that day. I'll swear to that!"

Billy laughed bitterly. "You're supposed to have helped me kill this hombre, Tom!" he said. "A dandy alibi *you'd* make!"

It was mid-afternoon when they reached the nester's cabin north of Wilder's ranch. Billy faced Jesse Evans.

"You was tellin' me the other day how simple it'd be to gather up a bunch of Murphy's cows," he said. He included the others in his glance. "If you boys want to throw in with me, roll your packs! I'm headin' for the Seven Rivers range!"

Evans stared at him and let out a whoop. "All we been needin' to make a clean-up in this man's country is a leader and now you're it! Let's go!"

Billy swept the little group with his eyes. "That go for the rest of you?" he asked. "If I'm leader I'm tellin' you I aim to be the boss! I'll call the play and make the markets. There's eight of us: we'll split nine ways. The extra share goes to me as long as I'm runnin' things. . . . If you don't like my terms, say so and we'll elect a leader."

They howled him down. "You're elected, Kid!"

And so, in half a dozen sentences, Billy stepped outside the law to the leadership of a picked, efficient outlaw pack.

They made their camp in a sheltered park on the eastern slope of the Guadalupe, within easy reach of Murphy's abandoned

range. Except Evans, every man of them—Fred Wayte, Charlie Bowdre, Hendry Brown, Tom O'Folliard, Doc Skurlock, John Middleton and Jim French—had fought with Billy through the Lincoln County war and they believed in him implicitly. It was as well that they did, for he drove them mercilessly. In two short weeks they had accumulated a thrifty herd, and Billy rode to Tularosa to effect a sale. A man named Coughlin there was following in Murphy's footsteps in the matter of beef contracts, and to Coughlin Billy made his sale. One-ninth of the proceeds of that sale he sent to Sante Fe for deposit under another name.

"The deposit slips will come to you," he said to Coughlin. "I'm in this outlaw business now and I aim to make it pay!"

On the homeward journey he spent the night at Chisum's South Spring ranch. Chisum welcomed him, but there was something lacking in Chisum's friendliness. He believed Billy's denial of the Bernstein murder, but warned him that he and other cattlemen had sent for men to clean up the rustling.

More weeks of driving followed. The Murphy herds thinned out at last and Billy extended his territory to stealing cattle wherever they were found, except Chisum's. Detectives from Washington and representatives of the Cattlemen's Association arrived in Lincoln County and swore in strong posses that toiled up and down the Pecos ranges week after week without success. For, in the towns at least, Billy's band was popular. They were desperate, dangerous men, yes. But they were loyal to their friends. They were thieves, yes. But they were jolly, generous, free-spending thieves. So that, if Billy and his men spent a night of revelry in a town, no single soul could recall which way the quarry had escaped.

But they were black, unhappy weeks for Billy, after all.

November found them in camp near Jim Greathouse's ranch on the Anton Chico trail some forty miles northeast of White Oaks. The band was larger now, Dave Rudabaugh, Bill Wilson and Tom Pickett having been recruited recently. Tom O'Folliard and Hendry Brown rode in at nightfall with a dozen steers to add to their growing herd, and O'Folliard was laughing when he joined the group around the fire.

"One o' them steers we just drove in was branded K I D, Billy," he said. "You holdin' out on us and buildin' you a herd?"

Billy stared, then laughed. "I'd plum forgot about that!" he said. He told them of his bargain with Chisum, made, it seemed to him now, long years ago.

O'Folliard chuckled. "It's about time you let down the bars on Chisum, anyway! He's after you now, all right, hell-fo'-leather! It's Chisum that's promotin' Pat Garrett for Sheriff—"

O'Folliard paused suddenly. "Hell! I didn't mean to mention that!"

Billy stood up slowly. "Garrett! Only last week, wasn't it, he was playin' cards with us down on the Ruidoso. And the week before that I let him have a hundred bucks to meet a note!" He laughed bitterly. "Pat Garrett for Sheriff, eh? . . . Pat ain't a fightin' man; and he's had no experience as an officer. But I reckon his friendliness with us will be a help to him, eh? He knows all our camps! He's been our guest in most of 'em!"

He shrugged and flung up his hands. "Boys, friendship is a great thing, sure!" He laughed, and the sound of it made O'Folliard frown. "All right, to hell with it! Chisum's cows are the same as any other cows from now on out! And as to Pat—I reckon I'll just have a little talk with him some day soon!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Ambush

THOSE weeks while Billy built his fame as a robber prince were sad, bleak ones for Kathie, too. The murder of Joe Bernstein, Indian Agency clerk, had shocked her more terribly than all the bloodshed of the Murphy-McSween feud.

Pete Maxwell talked to her, halting and awkward in his kindly effort to relieve her suffering. "Garrett says the Kid didn't do it, Kathie. Course, he was gone the day it happened, so he can't give the Kid a perfect alibi; but he'd've known, looks like."

But he succeeded only in arousing Kathie's anger. "Why should I take Pat Garrett's word when I won't take Billy's own? Pat Garrett is no better than the rest of them!"

Maxwell shrugged helplessly. "Well, Pat is Billy's friend, o' course; but I ain't never heard it said that Garrett wasn't straight enough."

"Friend, indeed!" Kathie switched her

attack with that unreasoning inconsistency that anger breeds. "A fine friend *he* is! Running for Sheriff of Lincoln County, so that he can track Billy down!"

She said as much to Chisum one day late in November when Chisum called to see her at the Maxwell home, and Chisum hemmed and hawed to cover an embarrassment he would not own.

"Garrett's a good man, Kathie," he said, insistently. "He's the next Sheriff of Lincoln County sure. He's ambitious, and determined as a bulldog; but that ain't a crime."

"Even if it means hounding his best friend to death!" Kathie cut in bitterly. She flushed uncomfortably and dropped her eyes. "Tell me what you've heard about—Billy."

Chisum shrugged. "A posse under a White Oaks deputy surprised Billy and some of his boys in camp the other day. It was a close shave; they shot Billy's horse, but O'Folliard and the others swung back and kept the posse off while Billy got free of the horse and on behind one of them. They got away, and nobody was hurt. . . . But the net is closin' in, Kathie."

It was just two days later when Pete Maxwell came home with bad news plainly written on his face. Kathie greeted him, saw that he refused to meet her eyes, and clutched his arm.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Is it—Billy?"

Maxwell nodded. "He ain't caught or hurt, if that's what you mean," he said. "But—it's just about as bad! He killed Jim Carlyle down at the Greathouse place yesterday."

Kathie's knees gave way under her, and she sank into a chair.

Maxwell told the tale in terse, unvarnished words.

"A posse under Deputy Hudgens of White Oaks cornered Billy and some others in the house. Then Hudgens sent one of his men, Carlyle, in to ask Billy to give up. Billy kept Carlyle inside as a hostage, and the posse outside held on to Greathouse, whom they'd caught, as a match for Carlyle."

"Somebody in the posse let off a shot—accidental, probably—but Carlyle figured they'd killed Greathouse and he'd better run before he was shot to even it. He broke out the window—and Billy threw down on him just as he went through. He got away with Billy's bullet in him and just man-

aged to live long enough to tell Hudgens who shot him. It looks bad for Billy—because Greathouse hadn't been touched. That shot outside was just accidental—but it sure set fireworks going. Yes, it's too bad."

Kathie sat motionless for a time, her eyes filling slowly with unnoticed tears.

"Hudgens' posse was cold and hungry and out o' ammunition, so they gave it up that evenin'," Maxwell concluded.

Kathie spoke then, her voice dulled by pain and deep bewilderment. "But *why*? Why did Billy do it?"

Tom O'Folliard asked that same question as he rode at Billy's side toward Anton Chico the evening following the fight at the Greathouse ranch. "What made you do it, Kid? I ain't kickin', understand; but—it sure did surprise me some."

Billy met his eyes, and O'Folliard saw sincerity and deep, dull misery in Billy's face. "I don't know!" he said slowly. "That shot, and Carlyle jumpin' like he did—I reckon it must've startled me. . . . I reckon I'm on edge!"

In Anton Chico Billy found a buyer for the herd, and the price he got for it merited a celebration. But neither victory nor wealth could shake the devils of remorse from Billy's mind.

"I'm gettin' like a rattlesnake!" he told himself. "Something startles me and I go for a gun! Greathouse was nothin' to me. Carlyle just startled me and—I killed him! I've got to stop that!"

But for three long weeks he rode in the grip of a surly anger at himself, driving his men relentlessly but holding himself aloof.

IT was not until he visited Coughlin, in Tularosa, that he found relief. Coughlin paid in cash for the largest herd Billy had offered him thus far, and Billy returned one-ninth of the purchase price to him. Coughlin chuckled.

"Maybe you didn't know it, Kid," he said, "but you're gettin' to be a middlin' wealthy man!"

Billy glanced at the deposit slips Coughlin was saving for him. He smiled suddenly. "Thanks, Coughlin! You've given me an idea!"

He was smiling as he rode out of town and the new mood made him feel light and a little dizzy, as if a burden had been lifted from him. "I'm through!" he told himself. "I've got enough for a stake and—I'm quit-

tin'! Maybe, if I beg Kathie hard enough, she'll go along!"

O'Folliard greeted him with a shout when he reached the camp and yelled again when he had a glimpse of Billy's face. "Boy, it's good to see you grin again!"

The crowd spent the afternoon in preparation, polishing boots, rubbing up their spurs, exchanging services with razor and scissors, hauling out their gayest clothes.

Billy was the first man ready, and he called O'Folliard aside an hour before the others planned to start for Fort Sumner. "I'm goin' on ahead, Tom," he said. "I—I want to see Kathie, if I can. I'll meet you all in town."

O'Folliard frowned. "Might be dangerous, Kid," he said. "They won't jump the bunch of us, but you alone—"

Billy shrugged. "I'll come up to Maxwell's from the back if it'll make you feel better."

He kept his word, leaving the Texas Road a mile or so from town and circling to the rear of Maxwell's house. A Christmas tree stood in a lighted window, bright with candles. Deluvina Maxwell, Navajo servant in the Maxwell home, looked up startled as Billy's footsteps sounded at the kitchen door.

Billy took her hand and folded her fingers around a crumpled bill. "Tell Miss Kathie I've got to see her, 'Vina."

The woman nodded and turned, her moccasined feet making soft padded sounds upon the floor. Billy paced up and down the spacious room. It was a long time before the messenger returned.

"She no come," she said. "You wait. Pete Maxwell come."

"But I've got to see her, 'Vina! I—" Billy's voice trailed into silence. His new-found happiness collapsed like a house of cards, leaving black despair again. The Indian woman shrugged.

Pete Maxwell came into the kitchen then.

"She won't see you, Billy," Maxwell told him. "Lord knows, I wish she would. She's eatin' her heart out. But—she says you chose your life and left her out of it, Billy."

"But, Pete, I came tonight to tell her that I—" He paused, shrugged and turned away bitterly. "I was a fool, I reckon, to think it'd make any difference to her!"

"What was it, maybe I could tell her, after a while?"

Billy shook his head. "It won't make any difference to her. Just tell her—I won't be troubling her again, Pete. She won't

even—hear of me, again. I'm through, for good!"

"You mean—?" Maxwell's face lighted suddenly with honest pleasure.

A SHOT rang out in the night air, followed quickly by a rapid fusillade. Billy sprang sideways, spinning in midair to put his back against the wall. Both guns were bare as he landed lightly, crouched a little. But there had been no sound of striking lead; no whine of bullets. Just the spiteful crack of a rifle—the rattle of an answering volley—and the swift diminishing beat of running hoofs.

Maxwell was first to speak. "Sounded like it was over by the old military hospital," he whispered.

Billy nodded. His face showed very white in the lamplight. "Tom and the boys were coming in that way! You reckon—?"

The Indian woman slid silently across the room and put out the light. "I go see," she whispered. Their eyes were not yet accustomed to the darkness but they could hear the slip-slip of her feet as she moved toward the door. The sound ceased suddenly. Billy saw the woman's dark shape framed in the dim light that marked the outside door. Instantly, then, his quick ears caught the sound that had made her halt. It was the furtive hurried pad of feet in the yard behind the Maxwell house.

Billy moved silently, covering the door with leveled guns. The footsteps outside ceased. The Indian woman's harsh whisper challenged. "Who? You talk quick!"

"Charlie Bowdre! Is Billy there?"

"I'm here, Charlie! What's happened? What did that shootin' mean?"

Bowdre slid forward. "They dry-gulched us, Billy, as we came in past the hospital! Pat Garrett and a posse!"

"Garrett?"

"Nobody else! No mistakin' him, big as he is! Stepped out ahead of us and yelled, 'Throw up your hands!' There was men behind him; couldn't see how many. O'Folliard was ridin' just ahead o' me. We didn't have time to make a move, one way or the other! Garrett fired before the words were out of his mouth, it seemed to me! . . . He downed O'Folliard with that first shot."

"No!" Billy's single word was like a cry of pain.

"It's true, Kid. Tom went forward over his saddle horn and caught himself. After that, there was nothin' for us to do but

fight, and we cut down on 'em. I seen Tom straighten up in his saddle and I thought he was comin' with us. Then I heard Garrett yell again for him to throw up his hands and Tom said, 'Don't shoot me again, Pat. I'm dead!' . . . I sent the boys ahead and came back for you. We'd better drift."

It was a long moment before Billy spoke. "Garrett—wasn't takin' any chances, was he?" The Kid's strained voice went on. "All right, Charlie. Let's be on our way. . . . So long, Pete. Give—Tom—a decent burial if they'll let you. I'll square it with you."

He was gone before Maxwell could answer. The sound of quick-starting hoofs rang in the night and Maxwell turned swiftly, startled by another sound.

"He's—gone?"

Kathie stood facing him in the inner door, her slender form in silhouette against the lights of the other room.

"He's gone, Kathie. He came to tell you that he was quittin'—pullin' out. Maybe he thought—you—might go with him."

He saw then that she was sobbing. "I—wish—I'd seen him!" she whispered. "I—wish—I'd gone with him!"

Pete Maxwell shook his head. "I'm scared it's too late now, Kathie," he said thoughtfully. "Pat Garrett killed O'Folliard out there on the Texas Road a while ago. Billy loved Tom, you know. I reckon there'll be no stoppin' him now!"

CHAPTER XIX

The Trap

ON THE Texas Road, Billy and Bowdre rode swiftly to the Wilcox ranch ten miles away. "It was the first safe place I could think of," Bowdre explained. "Wilcox is friendly and I don't think Garrett knows that."

But they found only three of the gang awaiting them when they reached the Wilcox ranch, Bill Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and Tom Pickett. "The rest of the boys scattered, Billy," Rudabaugh explained. "Skurlock figured that with Garrett up this way it'd be a good time to crack down on Chisum's range."

They awakened in the morning to a world deeply blanketed in snow. When they rode out after breakfast it was in a blinding, bitter storm. Billy hunched his shoulders

against the wind and buried his face in the collar of his coat, burdened once again by the black and bitter mood that had followed him so long.

They reached Tivan Arroyo, sometimes known as Stinking Spring, that afternoon. An abandoned stone house stood beside the spring and Billy called a halt. The snow was falling less steadily now, but it had served them well. The trail behind them was blotted out. They were safe, he thought.

They dismounted stiffly. The horses, shaggy as they were in their winter coats, were shivering. The house was small but Billy led his mount inside. "Bring in another one," he said. "We'll warm them up a little by turns, two at a time."

It was a desolate haven certainly. No windows, no opening in the rough stone walls except the door, warped and rotting on its hinges. The fireplace was choked with rubbish but they cleared it and the new blaze sent a bit of warmth into the room. They hovered over it a while, shivering and silent.

During the night Billy got up once and led the two horses outside, bringing in two others in their place. It was very cold. He remembered a little dancer in an El Paso saloon who had made up a song about "Billy the Kid, the outlaw prince." He had smiled then; he smiled now, crookedly. Fit palace, this, for an outlaw prince! He crawled back into his blanket:

The others awakened at dawn and they built up the fire again. There was no food for breakfast. Charlie Bowdre burrowed in his saddlebags and brought out a few handfuls of oats. He made a nosebag out of his hat and stumbled to the door. His pony was outside and the horse could eat even if the men must starve. The door creaked noisily as he opened it.

A rifle barked its short staccato crack somewhere outside. Billy lunged to his feet. Bowdre came back through the door, bent double, staggering. His hand clutched at his chest and Billy saw that blood ran out beneath the clawing fingers. Bowdre braced himself against the wall and turned as Billy sprang toward him.

"Garrett!" he gasped. "Posse—out there! It was Garrett—that shot me!"

Billy gripped Bowdre's shoulders. "Lay down, Charlie! You'll be all right—"

"All right—hell! I'm—killed!" His hands dropped, fumbling at his guns. "Let

me go, Billy! I'll get—one or two—of the skunks—for you—anyway!"

He jerked loose from Billy's grasp, reeling toward the door. His guns were bare, held unsteadily, waist high. He lurched outside, walking drunkenly toward a small arroyo fifty feet away. He reached the rim, halted there for a moment, swaying crazily as he tried to bring his guns to aim. Billy saw him pitch forward suddenly and go out of sight.

Billy turned to face the room. "He died—before he could shoot," he said. "Score two—for Garrett!"

Bill Wilson slammed the door. The three ponies tied along the front of the house were milling restlessly. Billy knelt beside the door and peered out through a narrow chink in the stonework. A rifle spoke once from the arroyo rim and the bullet cut one of the picket ropes. The horse jerked back, whirled and galloped away. Another shot cut a second rope and another horse was gone.

Billy slid the muzzle of the Mannlicher through a chink and waited. A third shot, this one from a different source. The third horse reared and fell, his body blocking the door. Billy snapped a hasty shot at the puff of smoke from that last shot and missed.

"Garrett's smart," he said. "Cut two of our horses loose and killed the third one, droppin' him where he blocks the door! There was a chance for two of us to make a break on the ponies we've got inside, but not now! These broncs would never jump the body in the door!"

FROM the arroyo in front of them Garrett's voice flung out a challenge. "Better give up, Billy. We've got you trapped!"

"Go to hell, Pat! You've got a bear by the tail if you only knew it!" But to the men inside Billy said, "Only thing to do is to sell out as dear as we know how!"

Rudabaugh stared in surprise, but Wilson nodded. "Billy's right," he said. "What I can't figure out is how Garrett knew to find us here! He couldn't trail us! The snow filled up our tracks before they was an hour old!"

"I reckon that's plain enough!" Billy's tone was bitter. "I've been thinkin' about that. Somebody said at breakfast yesterday mornin' somethin' about Stinkin' Spring. Wilcox heard that. I reckon he rode in and told Garrett we was headed here."

"But Wilcox was our friend!"

Billy made a wry face. "It's your friends that sell you out, fellah!" he said. "Judas sold Christ, didn't he? They've been doin' it ever since!"

The hours dragged. There was little firing. Garrett sent a rider to a nearby ranch for food and late that afternoon the posse gathered around a crackling fire in the arroyo and fell to. The aroma of hot coffee and food drifted up to tantalize the prisoners in the shack.

Billy called to Garrett, trying hard to put some humor in his voice. "Don't be so damn tight, Pat! Send us some grub!" Even as he spoke he remembered Morton and Baker trapped like this in the dugout down below the Penasco.

Garrett's voice came back. "Come on and get it, Billy! Hot coffee sure does hit the spot, a day like this!"

Well, why not? No use freezing and suffering any more. The game was over. Garrett held the cards. Their lives were their last white chips and they might as well throw in!

"All right, Pat! What's on the program for us if we do?"

"Your share of the grub and coffee!" Garrett promised instantly. "After that, a fair trial and whatever punishment the court sees fit to give!"

"Is that a promise, Pat?"

"It's a promise, Billy!"

"All right! Here I come!"

Billy stood up. Rudabaugh was just beside him and Wilson stood further back. Tom Pickett came toward them from across the room. "They'll shoot us down the minute we step outside!" he prophesied glumly.

Billy shook his head. "Garrett's word is good, I think," he said. "Anyway, what's the odds? It's starvation or a bullet or a rope! The bullet suits me fine."

He jerked the door open and stepped outside. The sun on the foot-deep snow made a dazzling glare. A dozen figures stood up suddenly from the arroyo just ahead but Billy could not make out the faces against the light. He saw one man throw up a rifle; saw another man grapple with him and pull the weapon down. Somebody had tried to earn the name of killing Billy the Kid and somebody else had stopped him.

Billy walked forward slowly, watching the struggle from a detached point of view, careless of what might come. Pat Garrett

met him at the arroyo rim and took his guns.

"I'm sorry, Kid," Garrett said. "I had to do my duty."

Billy shrugged. "You don't have to explain to me, Pat," he said. "I know you better than you know yourself! Success means more to you than loyalty, that's all."

Garrett stared for a moment and then turned away. "There's coffee and grub there on the fire," he said. "Help yourself."

They broke camp almost at once, loading Bowdre's body into the wagon. Billy and Rudabaugh climbed in beside the blanket-rolled body, leaving Pickett and Wilson to ride the two remaining mounts. By some miracle Billy fell asleep almost at once.

They were in Fort Sumner when he awakened. Garrett had already explained to him that they would ride at once to Las Vegas to entrain for Santa Fe.

They breakfasted and stepped out into the street again. A woman wrapped in many coats and shawls cried out sharply and thrust through the little crowd. It was Deluvina, Pete Maxwell's Indian cook. She threw her arms around Billy's neck, hugging him in a bear-like grip. The suddenness of it startled him.

"There now, 'Vina! Don't you carry on like that!"

"S-s-sh!" The sibilant warning in his ear silenced him. The woman's shoulders shook as if with sobs but her whispered words were clear enough. "Miss Kathie love you, Beelee! Me, I know! You not be scared, eh? I tell her I see you. You wait! We get you free!"

Billy watched her go, his heart pounding with a crazy joy.

It was a long hard ride to Las Vegas but Billy did not mind. 'Vina's words rang in his ears like chiming bells: "Miss Kathie love you. Beelee! Me, I know!"

They reached Las Vegas that afternoon and Garrett hustled his prisoners through the town to their waiting train. Only a short time ago Dave Rudabaugh had broken jail here in Las Vegas and had killed his jailer in the process of escape. A mob of shouting angry men surrounded the train when they arrived and it took a sharp determined fight to get inside.

But the train pulled out at last, leaving a disappointed mob. The way was clear to Santa Fe.

Santa Fe, however, was only a way station in the devious process of the law.

Rudabaugh was tried there within the next few weeks and was sentenced to be hanged. He was sent back to Las Vegas and imprisoned there, but broke jail a second time and escaped, never to be heard of again. Tom Pickett and Bill Wilson were also tried and sentenced to terms of imprisonment. But Billy's case was given a change of venue to Mesilla.

"Not givin' me any the best of it, are you, Pat?" Billy said to Garrett on the way. "At Mesilla I'll be tried before Judge Warren H. Bristol, the man who refused to hold court in Lincoln last spring because he claimed I'd threatened him! I never threatened him! Why should I, never havin' seen him? But he thinks I did and that'll make him a real impartial judge!"

Garrett nodded. "And that ain't all!" he said. "Bob Ollinger is a Deputy Sheriff in Mesilla now!"

Billy smiled crookedly. "The law's a great thing, ain't it, Pat? I killed Morton and Baker and they made me an outlaw. You killed O'Folliard and Bowdre and you're the most famous fightin' Sheriff in New Mexico! I killed Bob Beckwith, Ollinger's side-kick, in open fight—me, alone, against no less than twenty killers churnin' lead at me. Ollinger, with twenty killers helpin' him, murdered Tunstall who never fired a shot! I must stand trial for my life, with *Ollinger* standin' guard over me with a gun! . . . It's sure a funny world!"

CHAPTER XX

"Hanged by the Neck"

THE TRIAL in Mesilla brought the largest crowd the little town had ever entertained. The courtroom was packed to its walls and throngs outside the windows struggled for proper vantage points from which to see the famous desperado.

A breathless hush fell on the crowd when Billy and his guards appeared. On his right, Pat Garrett, gaunt and bronzed, more than six feet four inches tall. On his left, Bob Ollinger, shorter than Garrett but tall and broad, a dour swaggering man of middle age with washed-out eyes. He was a picture today, his long hair sweeping the shoulders of his beaded buckskin coat, his belts weighted down with guns and a heavy bowie knife.

Between these two Billy, short and slender, seemed a gentle inoffensive lad. He

wore a plain broadcloth suit with a flower in his buttonhole; his guards were picturesquely dressed and armed. He was smiling and debonair; they were frowning, weighted down by responsibility.

Judge Bristol leaned forward from his bench to face this boy whose reign of gun-law had outweighed the milder form of justice in Lincoln County for so long.

"William H. Bonney," he said, "you stand charged with murder. Do you have a lawyer?"

"No."

"No money to hire one?"

Billy smiled a little. "No money to hire a lawyer with, no," he said.

"Then I appoint the Honorable Ira E. Leonard to act in your defense."

The slow wheels of legal justice had begun to turn. The first charge involved the murder of one Joe Bernstein, Indian Agency clerk, near Blazer's Mill in the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation. Billy pleaded not guilty. The prosecution's case rested wholly on hearsay evidence. The jury rendered its verdict without leaving the jury box. "Not guilty!"

That much was cleared, at least. Billy let his mind drift off of present matters for a little while. Who *had* killed Bernstein? Why had Bernstein named him as the murderer?

Without adjournment the court considered next the killing of Sheriff James A. Brady. This time Billy pleaded self-defense. Dad Peppin and Billy Matthews were called as witnesses. The defense had none. Those who might have testified for Billy were dead or were themselves in danger of the law.

The attorney for the prosecution made an impassioned speech demanding death as punishment. Attorney Leonard pleaded the consideration of "reasonable doubt." He dwelt on Billy's youth; suggested a conspiracy of enemies bent on legal murder. He did his best.

The jury retired. They returned shortly, their faces solemn.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you a verdict?"

"We have, your honor."

Billy's lips twisted in a little smile. They had to go through their ritual, he thought. He could see the verdict in the faces of the jurymen.

"Guilty . . . fix his punishment at death."

"You have been given a fair trial," the

judge told him. "Every precaution has been taken to protect your interests. Acting on the evidence brought before them, the jury has found you guilty of murder. . . . William H. Bonney, it is the order of this court that you be taken to the town of Lincoln, in New Mexico, and there imprisoned; and that, on May 13th, between the hours of sunrise and noon, you be hanged by the neck until you are dead—dead—dead. And may God have mercy on your soul!"

The judge stood up, adjourning the court.

BOB OLLINGER stepped forward and caught Billy's arm. "Come on, Kid!" Ollinger was grinning. "You and me are gonna stick real close together now until May 13th! You won't be so cocky when they put the knot under your ear, Billy! You'll fold up then, damn you! And I'll be right there to see it—laughin' at you!"

Billy glanced at Ollinger, smiling enigmatically. He turned, starting back along the aisle. There was a commotion in the courtroom and a slender figure burst through the lines of waiting men. Billy halted, staring. It was Kathie!

She was sobbing as she flung herself into his arms. "Oh, Billy, my dear! I had to come! . . . I love you so!" His arms tightened about her hungrily, and she clung to him, her tear-wet cheek against his face.

"Kathie, sweet!" he spoke very softly. "Nothin' matters, honey, if I can just be sure of you!"

"I've never stopped loving you, my dear. I—couldn't let you face it alone, Billy. I had to come!"

He forgot the staring crowd and the solemn sentence passed on him a while ago.

"I'm going to the Governor, Billy!" she whispered. "He promised once that he'd pardon you!"

Bob Ollinger's strong hands tore Kathie's arms away and pushed her back. She stumbled and would have fallen but for Garrett's arm. Ollinger's curt voice growled in Billy's ear. "Move on, Kid! This ain't no time for lallygaggin' with the gals! You march!"

Billy met Ollinger's eyes and his own eyes were blazing. "I'd like to kill you for that, Ollinger!" he said softly.

Ollinger laughed. Garrett growled a mild reproof. "No use actin' rough, Ollinger," he said. "Come on, Billy."

They moved ahead again, down between those lines of staring eyes. Garrett took

Billy's arm. Ollinger walked behind them.

In the crowd, Billy caught Joe Flack's beady gaze. The old man shouldered through to him.

"You got friends, Billy." Joe leaned closer, speaking low. "Sit tight and don't make no breaks that'll give Ollinger a chance t' murder you, *sabe?*"

Billy nodded and smiled. Friends! Not even the sentence of death just passed upon him could weigh his spirits down. He laughed in answer to Bob Ollinger's abuse, made fun of Garrett's strict precautions for guarding him in jail that night.

"Nobody's goin' to try to lynch me, Pat," he said. "These people are my friends!"

"That's just the trouble!" Garrett said soberly. "It's a jail delivery that's worryin' me."

Nor were Garrett's fears entirely groundless. Doc Skurlock came to Kathie's room late that night, accompanied by Uncle Joe. "He waylaid me," the old man grumbled anxiously. "I can't make the critter listen t' reason so I brung him here."

Kathie's face went white at sight of them. "Doc!" she gasped. "You must be crazy, coming here! They'll capture you!"

"The town's full o' law-men, sure," Skurlock agreed. "But I want t' get the Kid free, Miss Kathie!"

Kathie nodded. "So do I," she said. "But not your way, Doc. I want—"

"But it'll be easy, Miss Kathie! They're takin' Billy to Lincoln, startin' tomorrow. I can get fifty men if I need 'em! We can waylay Garrett and have Billy across the Border—"

"No, Doc." Kathie's answer was instant and unwavering. "I'm proud that Billy has so many loyal friends, but—I don't want him as a fugitive!"

Doc Skurlock shrugged. "They sentenced him to hang, didn't they? What else can he be but a fugitive?"

"I'm going to the Governor, Doc, and ask him for a pardon. There's been too much killing already." Kathie looked at him with unwavering purpose. "Promise me you won't attempt it, Doc? Because if you don't promise I'll warn Garrett and he'll deputize a guard so big your plan won't work."

Skurlock shrugged helplessly. "I reckon that settles it," he said. "But I'm warnin' you, this is final. We're scatterin', see? The only thing that's kept us in New Mexico was the idea that we might help the

Kid. The country's gettin' too hot for us. Unless you're sure—"

"I'm sure, Doc."

He nodded and put out his hand. "So long, then, and—I wish you luck!"

But after he had gone Kathie lay awake till dawn, staring up into the dark above her bed. What if Governor Wallace refused the pardon? What if Billy died—*"hanged by the neck until you are dead—dead—dead"*—and she had to live forever with the knowledge that she had denied him life?

BY the end of a week in Santa Fe even Uncle Joe's determined optimism began to wane. Weary hours of waiting outside the executive offices gained them nothing more than disappointing contacts with the Governor's aides.

"Governor Wallace will see no one on the subject of William Bonney, Miss."

"But I must see him! He promised—"

"Positively no one, Miss. Those are my instructions."

She wrote, putting into her letter all the tragic fear and shining hope that filled her soul. And another week went by.

It was well along into the third week of their stay in Santa Fe when Kathie slipped out of the hotel one night. There were few lights in the Governor's mansion when she came to it.

She found a narrow gap in the hedge and slipped through into the yard. A sentry, with a rifle on his shoulder, walked slowly down the drive toward her and Kathie dropped, panting, into the shadow of a shrub, till he had passed.

A tall casement stood open not a dozen yards from her and there was a light behind the drawn curtains. The sentry came around the house as she waited there and she crouched in the shrubbery, holding her breath and trying to still the heavy beating of her heart. He passed her, walking around the house. The curtains near her bellied out in a gentle breeze and she caught a glimpse of a figure seated at a desk inside.

It was the Governor . . . and the window was ajar.

Kathie stood up quickly and pushed through the fringe of shrubs toward the window. A narrow ledge ran just beneath the opening and she clambered up. She could hear the sentry's returning tread upon the gravel walk and she wondered breath-

lessly if he would shoot if he should see her there. There was barely room for her to slip inside without disturbing the casement and she managed it without a sound. The sentry passed below her, humming a nasal tune.

She parted the curtains a little and looked through. The Governor was writing. She could see the heap of manuscript on the desk beside his arm; could even hear the scratching of his pen. He must have felt her presence there for he looked up suddenly and met her gaze.

She saw his hand move slowly to an open drawer in the desk. She flung the curtains aside and stepped down.

"Governor, I—I *had* to see you! I couldn't at your office and so I—came here! I'm Kathleen Haskel, Billy Bonney's fiancée."

He stood up slowly and she saw that his hand no longer moved toward the drawer. "Come in, my dear," he said wearily. "I'll confess, I didn't want to see you. But since you're here . . . sit down."

"But I—I can wait, Governor. Until you've finished your writing. . . ."

He smiled again. "That might weary you," he said. "You see, I'm writing a novel; a very long one, too, and there's still a lot to do."

He noted the strained eager look in Kathie's eyes and her nervous hands as she sat down facing him. "Perhaps you will read it some day," he said. "It is a story of the time of Christ, about a young man named Ben Hur. . . ."

"My dear, I thought perhaps I could take your mind away for a moment from what brought you here. But it's too near to your heart. . . . You want me to pardon Billy, don't you?"

She nodded. "You promised, Governor—"

HE IGNORED that for a moment. "Others, too, want me to pardon him." He picked up a scrap of paper from the desk and held it out. "This came today. You may read it, if you like."

She took it from him and glanced at it. It was a bit of wrapping paper, dirty and crumpled. The message written on it was a penciled scrawl:

You promised me a pardon and I'm expectin' it. If you doublecross me now I'll kill my guards and get away and come to Santa Fe for you. Think it over!

BILLY THE KID.

Kathie looked up when she finished reading it and met the Governor's eyes. "Billy never wrote that!" she said.

"You're sure? You know his handwriting, perhaps?"

She faltered a little. "I—I don't think I ever saw his handwriting, Governor. But he didn't write this! He couldn't have! . . . And he'd never sign his name like that. He never liked that name, you see. He—he's so young, and—and being called 'The Kid' reminded him of it. Just that alone would make me sure about the note."

The Governor nodded. "I hardly think, either, that he wrote the note," he said. "One of his friends, perhaps. . . ." The measured beat of the sentry's tread came to them through the open window and the Governor smiled. "If it were only Billy himself to be considered, *that* wouldn't be necessary. Nor would it be necessary for me to keep a gun here in my desk."

The Governor's face was solemn, almost stern.

"You said a moment ago that I had promised a pardon. But—Billy refused my offer, you see, and since then he's been an outlaw in a truer sense than he ever was before; a cattle thief and—a killer. I'm sorry, my dear, but I can't pardon him."

His voice was kind, even pitying; but there was a fixed inflexible determination in his tone. Kathie sank down suddenly into the chair beside his desk and dropped her head upon the heap of manuscript. The sound of her sobbing filled the Governor's room.

CHAPTER XXI

"One Chance in a Million"

THE Lincoln County jail, notorious for its flimsiness, was no place to keep a prisoner as desperate and as dangerous and as precious as the Kid. So Billy's cell in Lincoln was an upper room in Murphy's store.

It was a spacious cell, at least; a sixty-by-fifty-foot courtroom, in fact, complete with raised dais for the judge and railed-off jury box. It occupied the entire east side of the upper floor. A door opened into a central hall, which had a small armory for Sheriff's posses at the head of a narrow stair at its south end.

Immediately upon arrival in Lincoln Garrett had taken Billy to a smithy and had had

heavy shackles fitted on to Billy's ankles. There were already handcuffs on his wrists.

"I'm puttin' Bob Ollinger and Deputy Sheriff Bell, of White Oaks, on guard over you, Billy," Garrett said. "Bell was a close friend of Jim Carlyle's."

There was meaning in that last sentence and Billy smiled. "Still takin' no chances, eh, Pat? Ollinger swore to kill me for killin' Beckwith; Bell hates me for killin' Carlyle. . . . All right. I'm not plannin' to escape!"

Inside the room, Deputies Bell and Ollinger maintained a constant vigilance. Day after day slid by and Ollinger kept up his torrent of abuse. "Mornin', Kid. One day nearer the gallows, eh? . . . I'll tell yuh, Kid, hangin's a damn hard way t' die! You bein' light will make it worse, too; yuh ever think o' that? Take a light man, now, the fall don't always break his neck. You'll have t' just hang there and strangle, like as not."

"Well, you'll enjoy that, won't you, Bob?"

"You bet I will, Kid! Only one thing I'd like better'n that, and that's t' knock yuh off myself!" He patted the shotgun that he carried constantly and laughed. "Both barrels loaded with buckshot, Billy! Just waitin' for yuh t' make a break!"

The man's voice was like a rasp, tearing ceaselessly at Billy's nerves. His capacity for cruelty seemed limitless. Day after day his taunts went on and Billy came to hate Ollinger with a cold intensity that surpassed any passion he had ever known.

Bell was not so bad. Bell was human, at least. Bell would gossip casually, play cards now and then, chuckle over Billy's jokes. But Ollinger—!

John Chisum came to visit with Billy once, but the old relationship was gone. Uncle Joe Flack had been right, however, when he said, "Yuh've got friends." They came now, a host of them: Pete Maxwell, Ygenio Salazar and Juan Patron, Frank Coe and many others. Maxwell brought some heartening news.

"Kathie and Uncle Joe are in Santa Fe, Billy," he said. "I reckon we'll be hearin' from them soon."

It was Coe who told Billy of the precautions Garrett took in guarding him. "They search every man that comes up here, Billy," he said, laughingly. "They even took my pocket-knife away from me!"

The days slid into weeks. One night

under cover of his blankets, Billy discovered an amusing fact. The handcuffs Garrett had put on so carefully were loose! Not faulty in any way; not unlocked; merely loose enough to slip down over his hands if he used a little force. He smiled into the darkness. "Another advantage," he thought, "in bein' small! If I was plan-nin' an escape this would be a lucky break."

Ollinger had gone out to lunch and Billy was alone with Bell when Kathie finally came. They were playing cards and Bell looked up quickly when Kathie knocked and dropped his hand toward his gun before he called, "Come in!"

Billy sprang up at sight of her and took a step toward the door. The shackles tripped him and he staggered a little; she took him in her arms and he felt her body shake with sobs. Bell cleared his throat and walked away, seating himself at the other end of the room where he could watch as unobtrusively as possible.

She spoke swiftly, words tumbling past her trembling lips, her voice low and strained. "He refused, Billy! Governor Wallace refused to pardon you!"

He nodded, but she saw his eyes take on that old impenetrable veil.

"Oh, it's all my fault, Billy!" she sobbed. "Skurlock came to me the night after the trial. He was planning to waylay the guards as they brought you here. And I wouldn't let him do it, Billy! I was so sure the Governor would keep his word—"

The color had gone out of Billy's face but he answered her mechanically, soothing her. "It's all right, Kathie," he said. "You did the best you could. I—I should've known better than to expect the Governor to help." But he *had* expected it! He had not realized till now how terribly he had depended on this thing that was denied him now.

He guided her to his cot bed beside the wall and sat down beside her. She was still sobbing. It startled him for a moment to hear her whispered words: "*There's still time, Billy! Uncle Joe—Wilder—they'll help; we'll get you free!*"

He glanced across the room at Bell; buried his face in Kathie's hair. "No, Kathie! Some of 'em might be killed—Kathie, if I got away, would you go with me?"

"O, yes, Billy—I'd go anywhere!"

He laughed softly, and there was a note of triumph in the sound and of ex-

ultant joy. "I've still got time," he whispered. "Fifteen days. . . . All I need's a gun! I'll manage it—somehow!"

Bell stood up and came toward them and Billy lifted Kathie to her feet. She wiped her eyes and smiled bravely as she turned to Bell. "I'll come again, if I may," she said. "You'll let me, won't you?"

Bell frowned, but nodded. "I reckon I won't stop you," he said. "Ollinger might, but—"

"I'll come when he's not here!"

Bell stared after her and shrugged. "I reckon Ollinger would raise plenty hell if he knowed she was here," he said.

"He needn't know it, then," Billy suggested.

BILLY walked to the window overlooking the street. With practice, a man could learn to take steps exactly long enough and not too long to match the shackle chain. He would practice that, these next few days.

Ollinger came in then, carrying the ever-present double-barreled gun. "Your turn to eat, Bell," he said. "Well, Kid, Garrett tells me he's got a man hired t' build the gallows! That means the time ain't long!"

The day dragged past, and the next one began. For the first time since his imprisonment Billy was restless, pacing the floor from end to end, measuring his steps to match the length of chain between his ankles. Ollinger noticed this and commented on it.

"Gettin' restless, eh, Kid? Nerve beginnin' to break, eh? I always knowed it would!"

"My nerve's all right, Ollinger," Billy told him quietly. "I just need exercise."

But Ollinger's taunting voice went on until Billy longed to smash his steel-clad hands into his tormentor's face. He was glad when noon-time came and Ollinger went out for lunch.

Billy listened to Ollinger's departing steps as he had done so many times before, but this time there was purpose in his listening. Ollinger always carried his shotgun back to the armory at the end of the hall before going down the stairs. He did that now. The armory door was barred on the outside, Billy remembered, but it was not locked. He knew that because he had timed the pause between Ollinger's last step and the creak of the door as it opened. It was a fact well worth remembering!

He was sitting on his cot when Kathie

knocked this time. Again Bell dropped his right hand to his gun before he called, "Come in!" She was smiling as she entered and her cheeks were flushed; a different girl, Bell thought, from the grief-stricken Kathie he had seen here yesterday.

"I can't stay but a minute, Billy," she said. "Pete is waiting for me." She crossed the room and Billy stood up to welcome her. She kissed him and held him close. *"I've got it, Billy! It's in my sleeve! It's the gun John Wilson gave me when I rode to Wilder's."* Her whisper was barely audible, her lips pressed close against his ear.

"Gee, this is great, Kathie! Bein' in jail ain't bad when I can see you every day! Sit down."

She sat beside him on the cot and Bell tipped back a little in his chair, watching them through slitted eyes.

"When you kiss me goodbye, Kathie, slip the gun inside my shirt!"

"Oh, Billy, I'm so afraid! Be careful, dear." She swayed toward him, faltering a little under the heavy nervous strain. He laughed softly and patted her arm.

"There, sweet! Don't cry. . . . *Don't worry, now! I'll make it, sure!—You're still at Maxwell's? Same room and all? I'll come there for you.*"

Bell moved restlessly and Kathie stood up. "I must go," she said. "Pete will be furious! . . . Goodby, Billy. I'll ride down again next week sometime."

She put her arms around him, turning a little so that her back was turned to Bell. Billy's hands, pressed between them in the close embrace, loosed a button of his shirt and almost instantly he felt the smooth warm touch of steel against his skin as she slid the gun inside his belt. He kissed her, smiling.

"Goodby, sweetheart. I'll count the days!"

She thanked Bell and blew a kiss to Billy and was gone. Bell hitched his gunbelt up a little as he swaggered back toward his chair. "Damn fine little girl, she is," he said. "Not many girls would stick the way she's stickin' to you."

Billy nodded and sat down on the cot again. The gun inside his shirt pressed hard against his ribs. *"Why not do it now?"* he thought. *"Now—before Ollinger comes back!"*

But other footsteps sounded on the stairs and he relaxed. This time the visitor was Old Man Goss, the keeper of the jail prop-

er. He brought Billy's lunch on a tray and sat down to chat with Bell while Billy ate.

"That goes to show," Billy told himself, "I mustn't leap before I look! If I'd made a break just now Old Goss would've spoiled the play! I'll have to figure it all out. . . ."

He lay down after lunch and pretended to sleep. With infinite care, face to the wall, he hid the gun beneath the blankets on the cot. It would be safer there. The bulge it made beneath his shirt might be noticed. . .

Pat Garrett came in that afternoon and let slip the fact that he was going to White Oaks on business the next morning. The news set Billy's hopes agog. If he could manage his escape while Garrett was away the pursuit would lack its principal directing force.

He slept but fitfully that night but morning found him gay and insolent.

Old Man Goss arrived with Billy's noon-day lunch and Ollinger glanced at his watch in some surprise. "Didn't know it was so late," he said. "I'm leavin', Bell. . . . Eat hearty, Kid. Remember what I said about yuh bein' too light! Yuh got t' put on more weight or the rope won't snap your neck!"

Billy grinned and nodded, lifting a cup of coffee to his lips. Awkward business, eating, when both hands must move in unison. He heard Ollinger's heavy footsteps as he walked down to the armory. The armory door squeaked open—squeaked shut. Ollinger went down the stairs. This time, Old Man Goss would be away before Ollinger returned.

Billy finished his meal and pushed back, walking slowly to his cot. Old Man Goss picked up the tray and carried it away. Bell walked to a window and stood there, framed against the light, looking out across the town.

Billy's right hand found the gun beneath the blankets; pulled it clear and slid it down inside his boot. If he put the drop on Bell when Bell was on his feet the deputy might take a chance and make his draw. It would be better to get Bell out of position; put the gun right in his ribs, if possible. A gun close-up loomed bigger and more startling than a gun across a room.

"How about dealin' out some monte, Bell, while Ollinger's away?" Billy suggested.

He sat down on the edge of the table where he and Bell had played so many times. Sitting in a chair, they had found, made it difficult for Billy to reach the cards.

Bell took a chair and spread the cards. Billy took a handful of matches from a box they kept for use as chips. A chair stood back of him and he reached out with his foot and dragged it near, resting one booted foot upon the seat. The gun inside the bootleg was within a scant ten inches of his hands.

He reached across the board to place his bet. The chain between his wrists dragged noisily and disarranged the cards. A card slid off the table and dropped beside Bell's chair.

"Aw, say! I'm sorry, Bell! Doggone these cuffs! I didn't mean—"

"Never mind." Bell slid his chair back a little, turned and stooped to get the card.

"*One chance in a million!*" The old pet phrase rang singingly in Billy's mind. Sometimes, though, a man was forced to *make* his luck.

His hands slid back, fingers hooking down inside his boot. Not awkward now, those hands, but swift and sure! The gun ripped free, the heavy hammer clicking back beneath his thumb. Bell jerked erect. Across the table the gaping muzzle of a snub-nosed gun stared at him, a blank unwinking eye.

"Up with 'em, Bell!" Billy's voice was soft and low. "You haven't got a chance, my friend! I don't want to kill you, though. Stand up!"

"Sa-a-ay! What the hell?"

"Quick! Stand up and walk back to the armory!"

CHAPTER XXII

Jailbreak

BELL stood up and stumbled toward the door. Garrett had warned him; so had Ollinger. "Don't ever take a chance with him!" Garrett had said. "He's a friendly-talkin' little devil but he's deadly as a rattlesnake! One slip is all he's waitin' for!" And Bell had slipped! Just for an instant his vigilance had been relaxed by the Kid's suave smile and pleasant voice!

They were in the hall. Billy's steps were limited by the shackle chain and Bell's longer stride had carried him ahead a little way. The stairway leading down opened just ahead of Bell. He glanced at it. Safety lay down there, and regained self-respect; a chance to remedy the stupid error he had made.

He swerved, hurling his body at the stairs.

One leap and he was half-way down. He brought up against the landing wall. Another leap and he would have the shelter of the angle of the wall. . . .

Billy barked a warning as Bell turned but the man was gone. Billy leaped after him desperately, remembering instinctively to bunch his feet. The gun cracked as he landed, its sharp retort reverberating in the narrow hall.

It was a center shot. The bullet struck beneath Bell's shoulder-blade and pierced his heart. It drilled clear through, burying itself in the landing wall. Bell spun half around and pitched head foremost down the second flight of steps. He was dead before he had begun to fall.

"The poor, damn fool!" Billy whispered the words before the echoes of the shot had died away. "I didn't want to do it! Damn it, Bell, why did you have to make a break like that?"

But it was done. There was little time to waste. The noise of that shot would carry. Billy darted back toward the armory, gauging his foot-long steps with practiced nicety. Ollinger's shotgun stood just inside the armory door. Billy shoved the snub-nosed Colt inside his belt and caught up the shotgun. Holding it in the crook of his arm, he wrenched at the handcuffs as he sped back into his cell. They came free and he flung them aside; broke the shotgun to make sure that it was loaded.

From his old lookout beside the east window he scanned the street. Bob Ollinger lunged through the hotel door and came toward him, running, gun in hand. His big boots made little spurts as they struck the dusty street.

Billy stepped into the window opening, bringing the shotgun up to aim.

"You in a hurry, Bob?" he called.

The cool voice halted Ollinger as a bullet might have done. He looked up, his heavy jaw sagging. The twin muzzles of his own gun stared back at him. Over them he had a glimpse of Billy's face, white with prison pallor, the lips drawn back in a little crooked smile.

Ollinger's right hand jerked up, lifting the gun he had drawn as he crossed the street. Billy's finger tightened on the trigger and the shotgun coughed its throaty challenge to the town. Nine buckshot made a battering ram that struck Ollinger full in the chest, hurling him back and spinning him around. He fell face down, his arms

flung wide. Less than a minute had ticked past since Billy's cuffs had brushed the jack of hearts from Bell's monte layout to the floor. In that brief space, two men had died.

There was no regret in Billy's heart this time. He had hated Ollinger as a man hates a snake. He could hear Ollinger's voice now, taunting him: "Nothin' I'd like better than t' put these eighteen slugs between your shoulder blades!" Deliberately, Billy swung the shotgun up again.

"Here's the other nine, Ollinger!" he whispered. The big gun roared. Its second barrel vomited a leaden sledge that struck between Ollinger's shoulder blades and the inert body seemed to leap beneath the blow. Billy flung the gun away; saw it strike beside the dead man on the ground.

A GROUP of men were standing on the hotel porch, staring at him. Billy lifted the revolver from his belt and waved it at them. They understood! He was armed and ready for them! Except for them the street was suddenly empty.

Billy walked back along the narrow hall toward the armory, his thoughts racing. They might organize to capture him, he knew. And—they might not! Bell was dead; so was Ollinger. Garrett was out of town. Ordinary citizens might not feel the urge to risk their lives. Anyway, if they tackled him, he would give them a battle they would not soon forget!

He entered the armory and discarded Kathie's gun. He found his own guns, strapped them on, filling the belts with shells. He found his rifle, the Mannlicher, and a supply of shells for it that Garrett had taken from his saddle pockets. He loaded the rifle and stuffed the remaining shells in his pockets. He was armed now; the next thing would be to free his legs.

He went down the hall to the stairs and hopped carefully down, both at a time. Old Man Goss had locked himself inside the little shack beside the jail, but Billy made him come out, get an ax, split the leg chain, and tie the loose ends to his legs. Now he could walk again without the clank of steel. He lighted his cigarette and smiled as he ordered Goss to catch and saddle a loose pony in a little pasture nearby.

The pony was wild and hard to catch. Old Man Goss brought it up at last, breathless and apologetic. "He was a devil to

catch, Billy! I done the best I could. I sure wasn't tryin' to delay yuh none!"

Billy chuckled. "I know that," he said. "I've got plenty of time. If folks in town had wanted to make a stab at stoppin' me I reckon they'd have done it a long time ago as easy as now!"

As he rode past the hotel porch he kept the Mannlicher balanced on the saddle horn, its muzzle trained upon the group of men still standing there. But no one made a threatening move. He rode out of Lincoln at a gentle lope, heading west and north toward El Capitan and the little adobe home of Jesus Padilla.

Padilla made a bundle of bread and cheese while Billy wrote a note, pinned it to the saddle and sent the pony home. It would be easier, he thought, to climb El Capitan on foot. Besides, Garrett would figure he was headed for the Border.

He came to Las Tablas late the next night and found the house of Ygenio Salazar. Coming down the mountain he had stopped at a roadside smithy and a man he knew there had filed his leg-irons off. He could walk now without the sound of chains, but he was very tired. Salazar welcomed him and Billy sat down to the first real meal he had eaten since the day of his escape.

For several days then Billy lay hidden in the brush near Salazar's. He could have traveled on the second night for Salazar obtained a horse for him, but he waited, playing a hunch he could not have explained.

"Tomorrow night," he told himself, "I'll be in Fort Sumner. Saval Gutierrez will put me up and tell Kathie I'm there and get me some horses. Then the next night, Kathie and I will head for Mexico!"

PAT GARRETT, notified in White Oaks of his prisoner's escape, had ridden hard to Lincoln and had organized a swift pursuit. Posses had galloped south to cut off routes of travel toward Old Mexico. Others had hastened westward to scour the Carrizozo country and the Bad Lands. Garrett himself had ridden with Indian trackers, pounding up and down and to and fro in a frenzy of rage as he sought the trail. But the posses came back empty handed and the Indian trackers lost the scent where Billy had sent his horse away. Days passed and the chase became a hopeless one. Billy was in Mexico by now, surely. There was no use sending posses out again.

It was Dad Peppin, oddly enough, who

guessed the truth. "Why not try Fort Sumner, Pat?" he asked. "Billy's got a girl up there and it'd be just like the little fool to head that way."

Garrett was skeptical. "Why would he head north?" he argued. "His only chance was to head for Mexico and he's made it long ago."

Peppin shrugged. "He's smart, Pat. He might figure the trails leadin' south would be the ones you'd cover first."

Garrett nodded. "I can't afford to overlook any bets. I'll take Poe and McKinney up there. But it's a wild goose chase."

It was after nightfall when he reached the outskirts of Fort Sumner. They tied their horses a little distance from the Maxwell house. "If Billy's in Fort Sumner," Garrett reasoned, "Pete Maxwell will know it. Maybe he'll tell us."

"And maybe he won't!" Poe grumbled wearily. "Pete's a good friend of the Kid's. I'm bettin' he won't talk!"

"Well, it's the only chance we've got," Garrett pointed out. "We'll have to—" He stopped speaking suddenly, thrusting his deputies back between their horses at the hitching rack. "*Look there!*"

His whisper startled them. A man was walking toward them past the Maxwell house and there was a familiar something about him that made them stare. He was staring at the house as he passed it, walking slowly. He turned his face toward them finally and Garrett growled an oath.

"Hell!" he said. "I thought that was the Kid! Same size, same build, dressed just like Billy used to dress . . ." He paused. Tip McKinney had stepped out to intercept the man and was asking him for a match. The stranger gave him one and walked away. McKinney came back shaking his head.

"It ain't the Kid," he said.

Garrett grunted. "Hell, man, I knew that as soon as I seen his face! That jasper's wearin' a mustache!"

McKinney nodded. "He's sure a dead ringer for the Kid except for that, though. And a mustache *can* be faked, Pat! . . . But this jasper's eyes are dark."

Poe spoke then, thoughtfully. "Funny," he said. "I'd almost swear them was Billy's clothes! That white hat and the calfskin vest—they're exactly like the ones the Kid was wearin' the last time I seen him before he was captured!"

Garrett shrugged. "Lots o' fool kids in

this country are tryin' to look like the Kid," he said. "Come on! Let's go see what Maxwell's got to say."

DEEP black shadow hid the Maxwell porch and the three men halted there. "I know Pete's room," Garrett whispered. "You boys stay here, out of sight, while I go in and talk to him."

The door to Maxwell's room was open and Garrett did not knock. He crossed to Maxwell's bed, faintly lighted by the moon which peeped in through an open window back of it.

"Wake up, Pete! I want to talk to you!"

Maxwell jerked erect. "What the—? Oh, hello, Pat! . . . Hell, man, you ought not to come bustin' in on a man like that! I might've shot you!"

Garrett chuckled. "You nervous, Pete?" he asked.

"Damn right I am! I sold a lot o' beef today and I got the money right under my bed! And I got a gun under my pillow! If I hadn't recognized your face—What d'you want?"

"I'm lookin' for the Kid, Pete. Is he in town?"

Maxwell stared at him. "You crazy, Pat?" he said. "Billy'd be a fool to come up here! Why, he's in Mexico by now!"

"Maybe so," Garrett agreed. "But I heard—"

Garrett's voice ceased abruptly. Footsteps on the walk outside had paused beside the gate. A sharp-edged voice spoke suddenly.

"*Quien es?*"

There was an instant of silence. Then a rustle of movement as Poe stood up. Garrett heard Poe's voice. "Don't be excited," Poe said. "We're just some friends of Maxwell's."

Again that quick, challenging question. "*Quien es?*"

No answer this time. Inside the house, Garrett stepped back into the deeper shadow against the wall. His hand shot out, warning Maxwell to be still. "That's the Kid!" he whispered. "And he's comin' in!"

CHAPTER XXIII

The End of Billy the Kid

A SLENDER figure stood suddenly in silhouette in the doorway to Maxwell's room. It slipped inside, moving soundlessly. The moonlight from

the window bathed the intruder from head to foot and Garrett's heart skipped a beat or two. It was the Kid! The white sombrero, tipped back rakishly, cast a film of shadow on the upper part of the man's face but Garrett recognized it beyond any doubt.

The man spoke in a harsh whisper. "You, Maxwell, I'll take that money you're sleepin' on, *sabe Usted?* Careful—"

He must have sensed the alien presence in the room. Pat Garrett had made no sound and he sat in black shadow, yet the intruder turned toward him, moonlight gleaming on his leveled gun.

"*Quien es?*" he whispered stridently.

Garrett's gun lay close against his hip, its hammer back. He fired and flung himself aside. The thunder of the heavy report seemed to shake the room. Garrett fell and fired again, the flash of his second shot slanting upward from the floor.

Silence then except for the heavy labored breathing of a man in pain. A boot thudded once on the floor as the slender figure at the foot of Maxwell's bed reeled back a step or two. He fell, crashing backward heavily. Maxwell spoke at last, his voice sounding strained and hoarse.

"Good God, Pat! What have you done?"

Garrett stood up slowly. "I've killed the Kid," he said, and his voice shook in spite of him. "Quick! Strike a light!"

A match flamed up beside Pete Maxwell's bed. From the porch Tip McKinney called out anxiously. "What's happened, Pat? Are you all right?"

"I've killed the Kid, Tip," Garrett said again. "You boys stay outside. There'll be a crowd gatherin' in a minute. Keep 'em out of here!"

He turned as he heard Pete Maxwell's startled oath. The light in the room steadied as Maxwell lighted a candle with his match and Garrett stepped forward warily as Maxwell held the light. The two men bent down together, staring at the dead man on the floor.

They looked up slowly and their eyes met and held. It was a long moment before either of them spoke.

"That's — not — the Kid!" Maxwell's whispered words were barely audible.

Garrett's face was chalky in the flickering light. "You're right," he said. "This is the man I saw outside—in the street—a while ago! But he had a mustache then!"

Maxwell knelt beside the figure on the floor. "This kid's been wearin' a mustache,

too. His upper lip is white; see, Pat? And he sure looks like the Kid, don't he? Only his eyes are brown . . . By God, Pat! This is the jasper I shared a camp with up on the Canadian last spring! He told me he was Billy the Kid and I never knew the difference till I met Billy here in town, months afterward!"

Garrett nodded. "I'm beginnin' to see," he said. "This hombre was posin' as the Kid; looked like Billy to begin with, dressed like him, even claimed he *was* the Kid. Wore a fake mustache, I reckon, when he *didn't* want folks to think he was the Kid. Maybe this explains the Bernstein killin' down at Blazer's Mill. Billy swore he didn't do that and I never knew the Kid to lie."

Garrett stood up slowly, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "Well, it ain't as if I'd killed an innocent man, Pete. This hombre came here to rob you. I reckon he was givin' the house the once-over when we met him outside."

A low voice spoke quietly from the doorway at Garrett's back. "Sort of mixed emotions, eh, Pat? Disappointed because it wasn't me, but glad you've got an out because he was a thief! . . . Stand steady, now! You too, Pete! Hands up before you turn around!"

Billy stood in the doorway, facing them both with a crooked smile upon his lips.

The voice was soft and casual but the gun held level at Billy's waist was eloquent of deadly threat.

"Somethin' like that, Kid," Garrett said slowly. "What're you doin' here?"

ANOTHER figure stepped into the light to answer him. It was Kathie. Billy indicated her with a tiny tilting of his head. "Kathie and I are leavin' town tonight—to get married. We were just about to start when you came in."

Garrett grinned sardonically. "You ain't expectin' me to wish you luck, are you?" he asked.

"Why not, Pat?" Billy's voice was eager now. "You've killed a man who looks enough like me to be my twin. All you need to do is to close his eyes—keep certain people from lookin' at him too close—and bury him! And Kathie and I will leave the country. I'm goin' straight from now on; you'll never hear of me again. That's a promise, Pat. I never lied to you."

Garrett's tone was angry. "You know I can't do that!"

Billy's answer was soft but it held a note of insolence, too. "What else *can* you do, Pat? You wouldn't try to buck the drop, would you? . . . I've got horses waitin'. Suppose I took you along with me, eh, Pat? Down as far as the Bad Lands, say. Be a long time before you got back to start a posse after me, wouldn't it?"

Kathie stepped forward swiftly, facing Garrett, her face upturned to him. He looked down at her. "Please, Pat," she whispered. "I—I love him so! He'll go straight, truly he will. I promise that! . . . Give him to me?"

Garrett stared at her for a moment, then glanced toward the Kid. "If you hadn't killed Bell," he said. "I don't blame you for downin' Ollinger, but Bell—"

"God knows I'm sorry, Pat! I aimed to lock him up. I didn't want to kill him! But he made a crazy break to get away and—I had to stop him. Even then I aimed low; but he was goin' down the stairs as I fired and the bullet hit him higher than I aimed. . . . That's the truth, Pat, so help me God!"

There was a moment of silence. When Garrett spoke again his voice was husky and suspiciously gruff. "Well, what d'you want me to do?" he growled.

"Just what I said, Pat. You've killed the

Kid; the hunt is over. Kathie and I will disappear. . . . Pete can say that Kathie's gone back home. . . . All I want is your word, Pat, that you won't send a posse after me."

Again that throbbing silence. Garrett turned a little, shielding his face from the moonlight streaming in. "Get out o' here!" he said at last. "Both of you! . . . And—be good to her, Billy, damn your soul!"

"Thanks, Pat!" Billy's voice was husky now. "You—I reckon you're a white man, after all!"

Soft arms encircled Garrett's neck and pulled him down to meet a pair of clinging lips and he found Kathie's cheeks wet with tears in spite of the singing happiness that sounded in her voice. "I'm grateful, Pat," she said. "You'll never regret your kindness to us both, I swear!"

She was gone suddenly and Garrett heard their running steps grow fainter toward the back of Maxwell's house. The two men stood motionless. Garrett's voice was still husky when he spoke at last.

"I reckon I'm a fool," he said. "But—aw, hell!" He stooped and laid a pair of coins upon the dead man's eyes.

Maxwell put out his hand. "Don't worry, Pat," he said. "I—I sort o' like the Kid, myself!"

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"WHOOPS, OLD DEAR, IT'S THE NEW TOP-KICK!"



DRAW OR DIE

A COMPLETE WESTERN NOVEL

by T. W. FORD

An arrow-scarred arm reached out of the night and blasted down his dad from behind. So young Tuss Sloan took the retribution trail . . . But before sunrise, he was branded a gun coyote and slated to stretch rope. An outlaw spread beckoned and he hit the Gunshot Road, trigger finger proddy and young eyes deadly cold with a hate for the law of men.

YOUNG Tuss Sloan bit his under lip to stop its trembling as he stood there in the wan moonlight looking down at the corpse. It was his dad. He wasn't going to bust out bawling; that he knew. But something inside him was hurting like the devil and there was a mist in front of his eyes. And the whole of it was tinged with a crimson of cold fury. He bent and touched the edge of the wound in the back of his father's faded blue shirt. The blood was already crusting over the cloth, hardening, going brown. Yet Tuss could still somehow smell the gun powder smoke of the shot that had gotten his dad.

A single dry sob tore from him. That was all. Once more he bent. His hands were fumbling but he managed to unbuckle his dad's shell belt with its gun and holster. He strapped it around his own flat waist, stood spread-legged a moment as he whipped his hand across his body to the butt in the famed cross-arm draw his dad had taught him. "Not that you'll ever have to kill a hombre, Tuss. The Law's come to this land now," his father used to say as he watched him fire at a can on a bush in the north pasture. The gun jerked out in his oversized hand that seemed so incongruous with his small splinter of a body. The muzzle switched around, hammer cocking back under his thumb simultaneously. Then he lowered the weapon, held it in his two hands a moment.

It was a .45 with an ivory butt. Inlaid in the white stock was a single black spade ace. The now dead Tobias Sloan had been mighty proud of that hogleg. Four times, he had liked to tell, it had saved his life. There were four neat notches in the ivory as mute testimony to the fact. He had had it when he rode with Head Hagers, the outlaw.

"Head was a good man, son," Tobias used to say. "Square an' straight as they come. They *made* a lobo outa him—*forced* him onto the ol' owlhoot trail."

Tobias had run wet ponies across the Rio with the famed Head. But when he met the girl who was to be Tuss' mother, and who had died a short year after his birth, Tobias had gone straight. Parted company with Head. There had been a bitter fight between the two men over it. Tobias hadn't seemed to like to talk about that.

All Tuss knew was that Head had accused Tobias of losing his nerve. They

had gone for their guns. Shot simultaneously. Both had received flesh wounds. Then others of the band had separated them. And they had parted, bitter enemies.

But Tobias Sloan always said Head Hagers was a good man. A square-shooter. And that he had never had a chance.

That last almost brought the hot tears to young, seventeen-year-old Tuss' eyes. His dad, Tobias, had never had a chance. The boy swore once savagely on the now still night. Then, sheathing the gun with the black spade emblem, he went to work.

He got a shovel from the horse shed and went to the little, tree-shaded hillock to the north of the house. There was one mounded grave there now, a rude-fashioned cross at the head of it. Carved in the cross was the name "Matilda Sloan" and the dates. That was his mother. With the leaves whispering mysteriously overhead, sweating with the labor, Tuss dug a grave beside hers. It took him a long time to get his father's body up there. Tobias had been a tall, raw-boned man. Young Tuss had to halt for breathing spells several times on the sad journey.

Finally he had him laid out in the oblong hole, hands crossed on his chest, the Bible from the house placed beside him. The spurs of Tobias' boots, fashioned from Mex silver dollars, gleamed faintly down there in the moist soil. It didn't seem right that he should take the Long, Long Trail without that ivory-stocked gun with which he had gone through life. But Tuss had a job to do with that gun, a sacred one-man crusade to be written in burnt gunpowder.

"So long, Dad," he muttered through locked teeth. Then he started to cover up the body, trying not to hear the *thunk-thunk* of the falling clods. He mounded it up well, patted it firm. From the dried-up creek bed down in the gulch, he toted rocks to build a cairn over it all so that the coyotes couldn't get at it. Back in the horse shed he got two strips of wood and fashioned a cross from them as his father had for his mother. His hands weren't too steady. But he managed to carve "Tobias Sloan" on the cross-piece with the dates. He had seen the birth date in the family Bible. Beneath it he hacked the inscription "With his boots on" with his Bowie knife.

AFTER he had anchored the cross firmly at the head of the new grave, he

stood there a long time under the moon. Thinking. Living Tobias' last few moments over again.

He himself, Tuss, had been coming back from Union Bluffs with a couple of sacks of supplies slung over the saddle of the pinto, their lone cayuse now. He had taken that short-cut through the stand of yellow pine on the ridge side. He didn't know why but he had had some queer premonition of disaster.

He had tried to figure it out as he rode, whistling the *Blue Haze of Texas* softly. Maybe it was because of the way his dad had acted after returning from the trip up the line to sell those three Brahma bulls. Tobias had been moody, thoughtful. When Tuss had spoken to him about those rumors that Head Haggars was riding once more, was reported in that country with a new band, Tobias had merely shrugged. But one evening after dinner in the little two-room, paintless rancho, Tobias had glanced up from that tally book and the papers on that bank loan he had been studying.

"I seen Head up in a store in Broken Wheel Junction," he had said. Just that. No more. But that worried frown that was permanent since his return had deepened.

Coming down the ridge side, young Tuss had wondered if that was what caused that uneasy feeling in him. Then, through a gap in the trees, he had sighted those shadowy figures in the trail down from the house a bit. One of the men had sent a match flaring to fire his quirkly. And somebody else in the group had batted it from his hand with a sharp oath that floated over the night.

Tuss hadn't needed to see any more. Dismounting he had led the pinto in a semi-circle to get into the little gulch down from the rear of the house. Leaving the pony ground-anchored, he had worked out of it and edged up alongside the house. He had been afraid to shout out to his father lest it bring him leaping out the door and target him for dry-gulchers' lead. In the brush on the other side of the trail, he had just been able to make out the faint glitter of the conchas on a man's hat band. Through the chirping of the grasshoppers he had caught the faint click of a gun hammer being eared back. Down in the horse-shed, the old dun cayuse had whickered.

Too late he had heard the rustle in the brush beside him. Even as he tried to fling his Bowie knife upward that clubbed Colt

had slammed down from the shadow of the pepper tree beside the end of the porch. It had caught him a glancing blow over the side of the skull that made livid-colored lights explode in his brain. He had struggled to stay erect, to strike with the knife he still clutched, to cry out a warning. But his assailant's boot had swung up and caught him solidly in the groin. With a feeble gurgle, he had crumpled, rolling onto his back.

It was strange after that. Like something in a dream. He could see and hear everything perfectly. But he lay helpless, powerless, his body sodden and sick to the core with the agony of it. He had been like a witness from another world.

There was the commotion down in the horse shed, the muffled cry. His father had leaped out onto the porch in his stocking feet, bald head gleaming under the moon, gun in his hand. "Who's down there?" he had yelled.

The answer had been the bark of a gun. The gun of the man who had downed him, Tuss. Crouched, the killer had stepped around the front corner of the house, fired over the edge of the porch. That was the fatal slug that had nailed Tobias Sloan smack between the shoulder blades and snuffed out his life.

It had been all over in a matter of seconds. The killer had leaped onto the porch, run over to the fallen Tobias, examined him. "Got him," he had called to his cohorts. Two men had emerged from the brush across the road, leading ponies, four of them. The killer ran out and joined them. From the horse shed, another man had come, leading the dun mare. By rolling onto his side, Tuss Sloan had watched him. Mounted, the four of them had moved down the trail.

It was just as he summoned strength enough to crawl onto the porch to the body of his father, to that gun that had slid back into the holster, that the second shot came. Down the night wind drifted the fierce neigh of pain of the wounded mare. Shoving up on his knees, Tuss had seen the shot animal go weaving off the trail, staggering, careening blindly. Then she had crashed down on her forelegs, thrashed the grass feebly a moment, and expired. And there had been nothing but the retreating clop-clop of the hoof-beats of the four. It had been long minutes before Tuss Sloan had been able to stand erect.

But there had been no hurry, he realized, because he knew the murderer as surely as if the man had affixed his name to Tobias' shirt beneath the lethal back wound.

NOW, staring down at the fresh grave, fighting for control of the fresh grief in him, he shook his head at his father's grave. He was thinking of what his dad always said about Head Haggars. How they had made an outlaw of him. How he had never had a chance.

"You never had a chance, Dad," Tuss said. He clamped his hand over that white-stocked gun slung on his hip now. "I know you should be buried with your hogleg, too. But I got business with it, Dad. I got a man to kill. I'm going to kill—"

The whole thing flashed before his bleak, squeezed up eyes once more. How that dry-gulching killer had slid his gun up over the edge of the rail-less porch as he, Tuss, lay there helpless but conscious and watched. The man's flat-brimmed sombrero had masked his features in shadow. But the cuff of his checkered shirt sleeve had been unbuttoned. A splinter of the porch plank-ing had caught it, pulled his sleeve back to bare his forearm as he steadied his gun. He had been slinging it with his left hand which fitted the picture. And in the moon-light, Tuss had seen the arrowlike red scar that ran up the killer's forearm.

And Tuss Sloan knew only too well how Lawyer Abel Reach from up in town had a scar like that on his arm. Said it was a burn. But most folks figured it was a memento from some knife fight. Everybody knew how Reach was scared cold of knives; even the sight of one bared made him catch his breath audibly. And Abel Reach was left handed, too. He even signed his name that way, with the left hand.

So Tuss knew. Looking down at the earth under which his dad lay, he finished his remark. His vow. "I'm going to kill Abel Reach, Dad," he said. "Don't worry. I'll settle the score like you used to tell me Head Haggars always said—a man should pay his debts and even his scores to be a man. I'll fix it right, Dad."

Pulling off his battered, trail-worn gray sombrero, he muttered some thing that he tried to make a prayer. He said, "Gawd, he never was given a chance. What I'm going to do is only right. You can't blame a man for hunting down a snake, Gawd."

A little while later, he went down to the gulch and got the pinto where he had left it

ground-anchored. He stopped at the little ranch-house, put out the lamp, stood for a moment beside the blood-stains outside the door. Then he mounted once more and headed down the trail for Union Bluffs where Lawyer Reach lived. Left-handed Abel Reach with the arrow of a scar on his forearm.

Young Tuss Sloan was not going to return to the little, two-bit rancho where his mother and father were buried. He didn't know that. It wouldn't have made any difference to him if he had. He had a job to do. And, he was going to be branded a killer with bounty money on his head...

Everything fitted, he told himself as he swung at a lope toward the town. Abel Reach was left-handed; he bore that scar. Even the slaying itself had been carried out just the way a slick customer like him would figure it.

There had been a small wave of horse-stealing in the country of late. And with the dun mare lying up there in the grass with a bullet in its head, it would seem pretty obvious. Somebody had tried to run off Tobias Sloan's horse. He had caught them red-handed. There had been a brief gun-fight. Tobias had shot the horse in trying to get the thief. The latter's pardner had gotten Tobias from behind. That was the way the killer had wanted to make it look.

But there was more than that, Tuss told himself as he pushed toward the town. It clinched the thing. Everybody knew about how the railroad was going to build a spur from its main line to Union Bluffs. How it was going to swing in from the south side after coming out of the Pass. And Tobias Sloan's little ranch lay right in line with the proposed right of way. Just as soon as they voted that subsidy for it up in the State Legislature, things would start. And Abel Reach, through his political connections, had been one of the first to be aware of the proposed route.

Owning half of the Bluffs to begin with, he had started grabbing up all the land he could over what he had been tipped would be the railroad right of way. He had tried to buy Tobias Sloan's place. Had even boosted his stingy offer twice in the ensuing weeks. Sunday he had approached Tobias in town with what he termed his final bid. But Tuss' dad had not been interested. He didn't even want to sell to the railroad itself, when it came through,

at any kind of a profit. His wife lay buried in that land and he meant to stay there near her. He had told Reach no. And the lawyer, infuriated, had threatened him.

"The bank holds a note against that place of yours, Tobias Sloan," the lawyer had warned. "I know that. And you oughta have the savvy to realize that a word from me and the bank'll see fit to refuse to renew that note when it comes due! Now I'm giving you a chance to sell out before you are put out an'—"

TOBIAS SLOAN had laughed at him and walked out of the barroom. And Reach had called after him:—

"It's a plain hold-up you're trying to pull, Sloan. And I know more than one way of dealing with your kind!"

That clinched it for young Tuss. It convicted Abel Reach. When Tobias had sold those bulls to reduce his note with the bank, Reach had struck in the only way left him. This dry-gulching murder!

"I'm coming to settle with you for it—now, Abel Reach," Tuss Sloan said across the pinto's pricked ears. They were at the top of the hill that formed the sharp-scaled bluffs that gave the town its name. The rutted road twisted and doubled back and forth down an old wash in its side. Below, in a broad bottomland lay Union Bluffs, sprawled, the lights of its honky tonks and whisky mills and gambling hells like the spangles of a dance-hall hussy. The moonlight frosted the steeple of the long white Travellers House. The main street with its shimmering alkali dust, splotted irregularly by the garish coal-oil torches, bisected the town like a dirty gray stripe.

"Yeah, I'm coming, Reach," the kid said. And he started to fork the pinto downward, eyes hard, mouth a rigid seam of white in his lean face.

He was small, barely a hundred and twenty pounds of him. Wiry in a taut, hair-trigger way. Wide-flung, bony shoulders out of all proportion to his slimness gave him a strange top-heavy look. Round gray eyes crowded the small face with its high-set jutting cheekbones. He had a shock of unruly straight black hair. He had a terribly calm, drilling stare—accentuated by his grief, now—for a youngster.

He wore a pair of run-over, cracked black boots, gray pants with a crude patch inserted over one knee. There was a faded yellow shirt, frayed at the cuffs, his dad's

shell belt strapped just below it. And a flat-brimmed, low-crowned black Stetson, one of his dad's hand-me-downs, topped the whole rig. He looked a little like a scarecrow. But he didn't care about his looks. He had a mission. And come Hell or high-water, he was going to execute it. He would face Abel Reach, call him out, and after charging him with his father's death, tell him to fill his hand. Then...

The pinto's hoofs rattled hollowly over the little bridge at the edge of Union Bluffs itself. The revelry from the honky tonks welled at him. An ore-eyed breed stared sullenly as he passed. He went under the lightning-riven eucalyptus tree and over a low rise and was on the main street itself. At the first barroom with the gilt horse-shoe sign, he dismounted and entered, calmly and unconsciously shouldering his way through a trio of weaving men blocking the bat-wing doors. Quickly he raked the place for sign of a big, over-fleshed swarthy man in spotless pearl gray outfit. That would be Lawyer Abel Reach.

There was no sign of him. Tuss Sloan saw the swamper of the place hunched on his stool in the corner. He knew him. He went over and asked about Reach. The town big-shot was a great one for making the rounds of the bars each night, drinking little himself but buying himself cheap popularity by setting them up for the boys. The swamper said he hadn't seen Reach that evening.

"Your dad ain't a-going to sell out to him, is he, Tuss?"

But the youngster was already headed out and up the road, leading the pinto along by the ragweed of the gutter. Monahan's Faro Palace was the next place. Abel Reach was not there either. One of the house guards said he had been in right after supper time; but that had been hours ago. As he stepped into The Hacienda, the youngster's eyes got a sudden dead look. One of his huge hands flashed to that gun strapped on his left hip, butt forward. It was half out.

Then the thick-bodied man in gray on the dance floor turned as the jangle of the piano ceased. And he was a smirking Mex with a crimson sash about his waist, not Reach. Tuss found the bartender staring at him as he slid the Colt back. It didn't daunt him in the least. Nobody would blame him for killing Abel Reach when they knew his reason. He went up and asked for the

lawyer. The barkeep shook his head. Reach hadn't been seen there that night. The barkeep stared at the kid's holster.

"What you doing with your pop's hogleg. Tuss?" he demanded. "You look like you're on the prod, son!"

Tuss Sloan tasted his first twinge of fear then. A prescience of trouble to come, of what might happen. But he saw his dad lying out in front of the house with that hole in his back once more and his jaw tightened grimly. A man caught at his shoulder. He recognized him as Black Abe, one of Abel Reach's hired hands, a gun stooge who drifted around town, usually in the whisky mills, on watch. He was one of a pack of saloon toughs who served as an unofficial undercover bodyguard for the lawyer.

"Lookin' for Abel, huh, Sloan?" Black Abe said thickly, some the worse for a load of red-eye. "Reckon you got a message for him. Your old man come to his senses, huh?"

TUSS' mouth twitched once. That was all. He said drily: "My dad's resting quite peaceable, thanks."

Black Abe chuckled, "Well, you go an' see Abel. Reckon he's been expectin' you or your pop. He won't be making the rounds tonight. Ha-ha. Little private business up in his office. You go see him."

Tuss said "Thanks, Abe" even though it hurt him. He didn't know yet; maybe this Black Abe hadn't been with Reach on his dry-gulching expedition out at the ranch. He went out, walking stiff-legged. His moment was almost at hand, he realized. The lawyer had his offices and living quarters up on the second floor front of the Travellers House.

In an alley down near the hotel, he left his pinto hitched to a stunted tree. He strolled by the place twice, gazing into the well-lit lobby, speculating. The clerk there. If he went in that way, he would stop him, ask whom he wanted to see. Send up word, perhaps, at this hour. And maybe Abel Reach would refuse to be bothered now... Slim Tuss worked around the side of the building, around to the rear. For the first time, he realized how his skull was pounding from that gun-butt blow.

There was a slim sapling shooting up just a couple of feet from the roof of the long back porch of the clapboard structure. Fearful of the clatter of his spur chains, the

yunker shinnied up it, stepped onto the tin roof of the porch. Reach's suite was at the east end, he knew. He worked down that way, found a back window half opened. Easing in, he stood in Abel Reach's sitting room, redolent of rich cigar smoke. It was dark. His lips were hot and dry and his throat had suddenly become too small to swallow. Then he advanced across it steadily, hand on that black-spade gun butt, opened the door into the hotel corridor.

That end of it had been partitioned off to form a waiting room for the lawyer's office. A door with his name labelled on the glass was on Tuss' left, the letters running backward to him on the inside. Straight ahead, across the hallway, was a heavy wooden door with a brass sign reading "Private" on it. The brass glittered in the light of the lamp swung from the ceiling. Tuss marched toward it, then bit off an ejaculation. Half blinded by the sudden glare after the darkness of the night, he had kicked into a bookcase. Almost simultaneously it seemed light female laughter was choked off from behind the "Private" door.

Leaping to it, Tuss twisted the knob, his fury leaping into hot, savage life now that the showdown beckoned. The door was locked.

"Who's there?" Abel Reach called in his oily voice.

Tuss had his answer ready. "Black Abe sent me."

There was some whispering on the other side of the door. Tuss caught what might have been the tapping of a woman's high heels, couldn't be sure. Then the door was creaking on its hinges, swinging back, and there was the fleshy, tall Abel Reach with his black bars of eyebrows staring down at him. Reach recognized him as he hurriedly straightened his ruffled shirt inside his vest.

"Your father send you, Sloan?"

"It's sorta that way," the younker said. He had to admit Reach was a slick one, a good actor in the bargain, pretending he didn't know Tobias Sloan was dead with a slug in his back. A slug planted there by himself. Reach beckoned him in and turned to walk back behind his desk. He lurched a little as if he had been drinking. There was a bottle, a couple of glasses on the desk beside a thick legal tone.

"Don't sit down—don't bother, Mr. Reach," Tuss snapped shrilly. He had his

hand twitching halfway across to that holster rigged for the cross-arm draw.

"Your father should have come himself so he could sign the papers and—" Abel Reach was saying. Then some sixth instinct seemed to warn him. His hands suddenly clawed at the edge of his desk, his black brows pulling down. "What—" he started.

And Tuss' voice was crackling at him, snarling, breaking boyishly in his rage. "You killed my dad, Abel Reach! I saw you... You thought — thought you'd knocked me cold. But I lay there and saw everything. I saw you shoot him in the back—just because he wouldn't sell you the place! You danged buzzard! You dirty, back-shooting snake of a—"

"You're locoed!" Reach boomed. He started toward the front window that gave onto the noisy street. A call and some of his barroom toughs would come a-running.

"Don't try it," Tuss warned, the words hissing from between his curled-back lips now. "I'm giving you a chance, Reach, a square shake a pack rat like you doesn't deserve! You gave my d-dad none." He took a short backward step, gun hand falling straight at his side. "Fill your hand, Reach! Draw—when you git the nerve with a man a-facin' you!"

Abel Reach stood frozen, tonguing his thick lips.

"Draw or die!" Tuss Sloan barked hoarsely.

And Abel Reach knew it was so. Knew he was facing a killer in that keyed-up kid. His left arm jerked, coat cuff sliding up to reveal a segment of that arrow-like scar up his forearm. But he didn't go for that hogleg beneath his coat-tails. Instead, he flicked open the desk drawer, snatched for a .38 with a pearl handle in it. Behind him the door into the adjoining room, dark, inched open.

JERKING sideways, Reach tried to snapshoot from the hip. Tuss Sloan, legs flinging wide in the gunman's stance, body twisting to offer as narrow a target as possible, was clearing leather. Reach's cuff caught in some papers that flew up to cover his weapon a moment. His first shot ripped off a corner of his desk. Tuss was slamming lead, saw one slug chip the plaster of the wall to Reach's right.

Then Reach's second slug nicked the flesh of his left shoulder, spun him half around.

Dropping to a knee, he twisted back and thumbed that hammer some more. But, half crazed with rage, eyes clouded by his very grief-stricken fury, he was shooting wild. He knew it. The next moment, Reach was dropping down behind his desk to use it as a shield. The lamp on it went over in a crash that extinguished it immediately.

The wild-eyed Tuss Sloan saw another gun muzzle fling its flame-slash. He couldn't be sure whether or not it was Reach's. Reach groaned a pain-stricken oath. A breeze swung open the door to the waiting room. In the light from there, Tuss saw him sway to his full height, struggle to hold himself erect by the desk. Then he spun halfway around and flopped over his well-padded swivel chair like a sack.

Unconsciously blowing the smoke drooling from his hot gun muzzle, Tuss took two short steps toward him. Something told him that the lawyer was dead. Then he stared unbelievably at that bullet hole smack in the middle of his pearl gray frock coat. Right between the shoulder blades where his dad, Tobias, had gotten it.

Dazedly the kid ran a hot, trembling hand over his eyes. It wasn't possible. He knew he hadn't shot Reach in the back. His gun had snapped hollowly on an empty shell just as the lawyer had jerked up from behind the desk. Vaguely he heard the shouting from out in the road, the clatter as bootheels pounded along the wooden sidewalks. In a dim way he recalled that other gun flash.

He started around the desk hurriedly toward the door behind the dead man. Through the aperture he thought he caught the swirl of a cloak, a glimpse of bronze hair. As he took another stride, a voice leaped at him from the waiting room doorway. It called him by name.

"Tuss Sloan!"

He whirled, gun up and hammer earring back. Then he realized it was empty, anyway. He was yanking his Bowie from his waist-band when he saw that it was a girl in the waiting room doorway. Carmencia Watriss. They stared at each other for a long moment. Her breath made a hissing sound as her eyes picked out the corpse of Abel Reach through the thinning gun-smoke.

"He—he's dead," she said with a little cough.

Tuss nodded. He knew Carmencia,

wasn't deceived by that close-fitting velvet maroon frock with the long swirling skirt. She worked in a dance-hall but she was no ordinary honky-tonk girl. Men looked at the tide of black hair and the olive complexion with the ripe lips and took her for a Mex. He knew better than that, too. The blue, crescent-shaped eyes didn't fit the picture; those she had gotten from her father, Wild Mike Watriss.

Wild Mike, a devil-may-care rancher, had met and wooed Carmencia's mother in Mexico City years back. Swept her off her feet with his crazy Irish blood. She had been Spanish, just lately arrived from Castile. But a few years after having returned with his Spanish bride, when Carmencia was still but half-grown, Wild Mike Watriss had taken a bad fall from a half-broken horse one day and died of a spine fracture. And he had left his widow and child about penniless, his ranch being heavily indebted for his crazy gambling losses.

Marcia, Carmencia's mother, had exhibited a surprising chunk of the true pioneer spirit. Turning down all offers of charity, she had come to town, made a business deal with the owner of one of the gambling halls, and taken over the dance-hall end of the business. She ran it strictly yet managed to present what was known up and down the trail as one of the best places of entertainment in the Southwest. Now, the lovely, sylphlike Carmencia was singing there. And everybody knew how the grim-mouthed mother was always at hand every second she was on the floor to see that nobody molested her. A single off-color remark was enough to send the older woman on the warpath. The old settlers of Union Bluffs admired her courage.

Tuss could remember the night he had stood at the edge of the floor with his father and listened to her sing. It had been some song of Old Spain. It had made him well up inside sort of. Then she had swung into Buffalo Sal and some saddle-bum on the sidelines had started to sing a bawdy refrain to the chorus in time with her. That was the first time Tuss had remembered going haywire. He had found himself down on the floor, clawing and spitting at the man. His dad had had to haul him off. Afterward, he guessed that he had fallen in love with Carmencia then and there. Following that incident, when he came into town sometimes, he would see her on the street and stop to talk. Only he

never had been able to think of much to say.

THOSE things flashed through his mind in a single moment as they faced each other. Then she noticed the gun in his hand for the first time.

"T-Tuss—you—he's dead and you—" She broke off as the lawyer's body slipped with rigor mortis setting in. His knees clunked on the floor and his shoulders fell into the seat of the swivel chair, toward her. She saw that bullet hole in the back of the coat. A choked cry escaped her.

"I came to kill him," Tuss said in a swift tumble of words. "But—but I didn't—even though I tried to. Somebody—somebody else got him. He was facing me. I couldn't have shot him in the back."

"Tuss!" she cried with a sobbing sound.

"He shot and killed my dad tonight. Came out there to the place and burned him down from behind. I saw it. I came to kill him. But I didn't shoot him in the back or—"

Horror making her light-blue eyes tragic, she said, "When, Tuss?"

"It was—was about two hours back, I reckon." He saw his black hat on the floor and scooped it up. The blind passion had gone from him. Reason was asserting itself. Vaguely he realized that he should be pulling stakes. Folks might not listen to any explanation of a back-shooting job.

But she was shaking her head at him. "But Abel Reach didn't go out anywhere tonight. He was in town—right here, Tuss. I—I know. Because I was here with him this evening. I just left—got out—less than an hour ago. He—Abel—he asked me to marry him." She moved one of her arms and he could see a long scratch on it. He understood then. Reach had a rep for being a devil with women.

For the moment, he was doubly glad Abel Reach was dead. He wished he had killed him. In the back or any other way. Then the import of her words sank in.

"But he was there—I—I—" He caught the shouts from downstairs then, somebody stomping up the old staircase.

Carmencia was still standing on the threshold of the lawyer's office, half in the waiting room. She stepped back a little, gazing down the hall, through the door of the partition. He saw her fling a hand to her lips as if to smother a scream. She went sheet white, swaying a little. Her

terrified eyes darted back to Reach's body as if she were putting things together in her mind.

"Carmencia, I didn't—" Tuss started even as he moved forward, knowing he must escape. Somehow it seemed terribly important that he convince her he had not dry-gulched a man.

The next instant, she was dashing out of the waiting room down the hall. Her wild scream came back to him. "Tuss Sloan killed him! Tuss Sloan! I saw him—he killed Reach! Tuss Sloan..." Her voice quavered.

He could hardly believe his ears. Then he was running, panic-stricken, bewildered. He knew he had seen Reach throw down on his father... that left arm with the arrow-like scar. And yet Carmencia said she had been here with him this evening. He stumbled through the waiting room, into that backroom giving onto the roof. Glass shattered. He was dumfounded. He knew he had left the window up. There was a bloody gash on the back of his left hand.

Ramming it up, he got out onto the roof. Up and down the road the cry was going. "It's Abel Reach... Tuss Sloan killed him... Young Tuss Sloan gunned Reach, the lawyer!" It leaped and ran crazily like a prairie fire, the flaming shreds of information being thrown out from the hotel lobby. Back of him, in the building, Tuss heard doors slamming, somebody bawling to get the sawbones. Tuss knew it was too late for any doctor.

He swore softly as the night wind parted the tree tops. Moonlight like pale liquid water flowed across the roof, baring it, baring him. He was dizzy from that shoulder wound now, reeling a little as he hustled toward the sapling. Below, a stick cracked. He saw the man who had come out of the livery stable barn in the rear. He had been trying to slip up close to the roof, to the corner whence Tuss would descend. The man was tugging at the holster of a gun-belt he had just strapped on.

Desperate, Tuss Sloan learned one of the tricks of the gunman's trade in a split moment. He leveled his empty, still warm Colt down at him. "Make a sound—an' I'll ventilate you, mister!"

The man below froze, hands lifting unsteadily, bald head gleaming as he nodded. With a quick jump, Tuss grasped the sapling, got his boots on a slender limb halfway down. Then he leaped to the ground,

stumbling. The other made a dash for the rear door of the hotel as Tuss reeled. Tuss saw his gun coming out, barrel slivery under the moon. The youngster sprang for his man, lashing with his own gun barrel.

He almost missed; it was a glancing blow to the shoulder. Frantic, Tuss Sloan stepped in and drove with his wounded arm. The livery stableman toppled without a sound aside from a dull grunt. Then he was rolling down the open earthen stairs to the hotel's cellar. Tuss saw the other's gun fallen at his feet. He snatched it up, stuffing the weapon with the black spade emblazoned butt inside his shirt.

He was running again, feeling like a hunted animal, pulsing with the cold desperation of a fugitive. He heard his own name howled in the street out front again. Light appeared in the broken window above by which he had left. Somebody said he had gone this way. Ducking under the shadow of the eaves of the back porch, the kid flung himself across the alley beside the building, got behind the big general store with its broken packing cases strewn about the yard.

He was in the shadow of one when two men rounded the corner by the store's loading platform. They seemed a little baffled as they stared at him. "That you, Pete?" one called.

Again the instinct of the prey came to young Tuss Sloan. "Naw, he didn't come this way," he replied, squeezing his voice from his throat to make it sound deep.

They retraced their steps at a trot, one saying: "The girl says Reach was plugged from behind, too."

Fighting the rale of the breath tearing from his straining lungs, he knew then he hated that girl. Knew that if she hadn't come, if she hadn't gone shrieking—or if she had taken his word—he would have had a chance to slip out and get to the road unnoticed. And then there would have been none to point the finger at him, brand him a murderer. Now—

The overpowering impulse to flight made his legs quiver. He was moving on once again, ducking, darting; freezing for moments of eternity in the thickness of shadows. Lights were going on in the houses. From the side street at the next corner, a gun barked savagely as one of the barroom toughs mistook somebody else for the wanted fugitive. Then he was at the back of the alley where he had left his pinto teth-

ered. It seemed suddenly broad, ghastly nude in the light that seeped in from the front road.

He ran down it, weaving drunkenly now from the nausea of that bleeding shoulder wound. Once he had to stop. His thumb fumbled as he tried to cock the gun he had taken from the livery stable hombre. He was at his pony's side, tearing at the reins. And a man roared as he leaped from behind the upright of a wooden awning out front. It was Black Abe, one of Abel Reach's bodyguards.

"Here he is, boys! I knew he'd head for his pinto hoss—" he bawled, punctuated it with a shot. "Give yourself up, yuh dirty little dry-gulchin' rat! Surrender or—"

Tuss Sloan answered him in his own language. Abe's slug hammered into the side wall over his head. And his bullet—he was dimly aware he was riding that trigger with a new-found calmness now—slashed a great splinter from the post shielding the gun-hand. Abe dived for the protection of the nearby water trough.

One foot in the stirrup, Tuss shot a look behind. Shadowy figures were already seething in the back end of the alley. That was why the others with Abe had not risked more gun-work. He swung his pinto out into the road as two shots flailed by his hat from the rear.

He might have made it if it hadn't been for his wounded shoulder. The other hand clutching his gun, he couldn't quite get himself up into the saddle in time. From the other side, a man threw himself at the bridle and sawed at it, yanking the little pony around. Leaping up from back of the horse trough, Black Abe clawed at the kid's body. Tuss came off and landed rolling in the dirt. He was up first, heedless of a gun across the street that licked at him with an orange-shot fang from the dimness. As Black Abe lunged up from his knees, Tuss Sloan chopped down with his gun barrel. Reach's henchman got a stupid look and flopped over, red spurting from the gash the gun sight had made in his cheek.

Zigzagging, sending a chunk of hot lead droning by another of the saloon toughs who tried to close on him, little Tuss got down to the next hitch-rail and darted among the nervous ponies there. His Bowie was out and he had slashed a set of reins. He leaped into the kak, bent double, and fed the animal spur steel as he headed down the road for the trail that doubled up the ragged

bluff. Halfway up that road, in the moonlight, he could see a cloaked rider pushing hard. Once he got that far up, it would be simple to hold off pursuit temporarily by shooting back down the trail.

He never got the chance. A bullet ricocheted off a slab of rock beside The Bluffs' main street, screaming. Then there was a whinny of agony from the horse under him. The next moment, struck in the foreleg, the pony careened and went crashing. Tuss Sloan was catapulted into the dust, striking the side of his head where he had been hit before that night.

When his senses cleared, he had a mouthful of dust. He saw his borrowed Colt lying a full two yards away as he reared to his knees. And two of Reach's gunhands were rushing at him but a few strides away, hog-legs covering him. Tuss Sloan had lost his fight.

He was quickly ringed by a hedge of men. His head was pounding so their excited voices were little more than a dull droning to him. Sam Atters, the town marshal, white hair blowing in the night wind, came striding authoritatively through.

"I'd have never believed it of you—Tobias Sloan's son," he said as he picked up the gun the kid had been using.

Tuss spat blood; somebody had struck him in the face. "He dry-gulched my dad," he said wearily. "I saw him—earlier tonight—he—"

"Reach didn't leave town today," the livery stable owner called out. "I know. Neither o' his two hosses been outa my feed lot."

Tuss tried to tell it. He couldn't see how he had been wrong. But Atters was too old a hand at such business. "Mebbe-so your pop, he got shot, Tuss. We'll go out an' see come mornin'. But you come and got the wrong hombre, son. An' you shot him in the back!"

The bartender of The Hacienda, still wearing his flour-sack apron, put in his say. "The younker was around huntin' Reach earlier. He come inta our place askin' for him—proddin' his gun hand, too."

Atters ran over him quickly looking for a hideout weapon, relieved him of his Bowie knife. "You should uh let the Law handle it for you, Tuss," he said sadly.

THE younker's mouth twisted bitterly. He had thought of doing that but only for a brief moment. The Law was all too

scarce and impotent in the bargain around Union Bluffs. Abel Reach had a way of handling his own Law. And Tuss Sloan couldn't picture the town marshal slipping a hempen necktie about that slick shark's throat.

He tried to speak again even as he realized how the evidence was piling up against him. They were moving along the road toward the two-story ramshackle jail up around the turn from the hotel. The hotel clerk was telling how the kid must have snuck in somehow; he said he couldn't have come in either door and gone up those stairs without being seen.

"He sneaked in to do a sneak job in the back," somebody described it. "He—"

Holding a hairy hand to his sliced-up face, Black Abe came barging forward. "What're we waitin' for? Who's got a rope?" he demanded. "This little spittin' coyote killed Abel an' tried to shoot up half the town! I say—what're we waiting for?"

Atters spoke to a few of the older men. They hemmed in the prisoner more tightly, swung in at a house. Tuss Sloan barely had a chance to get his breath before they were hustling him out of the back door and along in the rear.

"A lotta gents in this town was livin' off Abel Reach! Not that they had any love for him. But they're going to be sore as blazes now that they get no more whisky money," Atters summed it up as he led the way.

They went in the back of the jail-house near the strip of mesquite jungle that stretched over the dunes back of that side of The Bluffs. In the office, a lamp was lit. Atters' deputy got some water and rags and washed out the youngster's shoulder wound. It was painful but not serious, the slug having passed through the flesh completely. But it gave Tuss a hunch.

"If I bush-whacked him, how did I get shot myself?"

One of the men laughed harshly. "Even dyin', a man might turn an' trigger once."

"But the shot came from another room—behind, I think," the kid tried once more. "I think—"

They weren't even listening. The marshal was getting the cell keys from a drawer in the battered roll-top desk. Tuss heard one of the men muttering: "Blood'll tell. Ol' Tobias had a hell of a temper years back. He was forking the owlhoot trail once, too. The youngster went locoed. 'S all."

Tuss squeezed up his eyes once to keep that moisture from welling over in them. He was suddenly danged scared. And ashamed, somehow, too. He had brought disgrace on that gaunt man lying in the lonely grave back on the ranch. Staring hard, he saw a lone figure across the street in the full moonlight. She was watching the jail. Even despite the serape wrapping her head and shoulders he could see it was Carmencia.

"Put him one cell down from them Cisto twins, Ed," the marshal told his deputy. There was a note of pride in his voice as he mentioned the Cisto twins. They were a pair of renegade gun-aces who had just slipped up north of the Border for the first time in years. Ornery killers wanted in two states on more than one charge. Trying to track down some two-bit horse-thief, the marshal and his posse had come across them sleeping off a drunk in a nester's hayrick. Had nabbed them. With an election coming up shortly, it didn't hurt the marshal's chances to have a fat jail cargo.

Ed, the deputy, was always one to do things according to the book. He kept one hand on his Colt as he herded the prisoner up the rear stairs by the light of a guttering lantern. Opposite the rear cell, he ordered him to halt. As he opened up, Tuss got a glimpse of the Cistos in two cells forward, facing each other, at the front of the building. Their flat faces were pressed against the barred fronts of the cells to see the newcomer. They were gangling men with scrawny necks and stony eyes set in deep pits of sockets. Their hair and eyebrows had been bleached by years in the sun on the open trail.

The one in the right cell bared blackish teeth in a dry snicker of a laugh. He was Hack Cisto. He said, "Looka him, Squint! Gunnin' in the back at his age—tch! tch! He'll make a nice tender meal for the buzzards!"

"Yeah," said Squint, dubbed that because of a slight cast in one eye. "Hell, a man only hangs once."

Then the cell door was slamming behind little Tuss Sloan. And he realized he was doomed to be a cottonwood apple. That he was as good as dancing a jig in thin air at the end of a rope. A bitter hate for all of them, especially for this Law they represented, began to fester in him.

Tuss didn't know how much later it was when he found it. He had been sitting

on the rude t'eton pole cot in one corner, dazed, numbed out of his misery. Then he realized his right boot felt funny and he bent down to probe at it. And there it was, caught in the top of his boot where his gray pants were tucked in. The ivory stocked gun with the black spade emblem of his dad. It had slipped down inside his shirt, past his waist-band, down his leg to drop inside the boot so that the marshal had missed it when searching him. But it was empty.

Still, it was something even if they had stripped his shell belt from him downstairs. A man could run a bluff, even with a cartridgeless Colt. It was some sort of hope. It could help him escape the hang-rope.

He began figuring, cudgeling his mind for schemes. Ed the jailor came clumping up the stairs. He had three tin mugs and a bottle of red-eye the Cistos had given him money to get. He passed Tuss' cell and the kid scuttled forward, gun close at his side, seeing the way out. When the jailor went back down again, he could ram that gun in his side and make him open up. But that idea died a-borning as he heard Ed snicker wisely up front while he sloshed whisky into the cups.

"Don't you fellas git smart an' try no tricks," he warned pompously. "'T won't do you no good. I'm smart, I am. I left the cell keys downstairs. I ain't no dang, simple fool! No-siree, Bob!"

Tuss got to thinking again, belaboring his brain for a plan. Across from his cell, in the side wall of the building right over the stairs, was a small window. Through it he could see the paint-peeling side of what he knew to be the big white meeting house. That window was so small they hadn't seen fit to bar it. Now if the downstairs were blocked—and a stripling like him got a chance to eel through that window...yeah, it would be quite a drop. But Tuss Sloan was coldly desperate.

Up forward, Ed the jailor was saying, "Oh, Atters, him and his friends went down to the horseshoe to celebrate a little. Word was that Reach was a-goin' to back his own man 'gainst Atters in the coming 'lections. So Atters ain't exactly weepin' over his demise...Naw, you put your cup down on the floor through the bars, Hack, if you crave another drink. You can't play no tricks on ol' Ed!"

Tuss paced his cell, restless for the chance to make a break. From down the road, a

man hurrawed, cried, "You're plumb right, Black an'—" and broke off as if suddenly quieted. The kid hopped up on his bunk so he could peer out the small barred slit of a window high in the wall on that side. Over a low store next door, he could see down to one of the corners of the main road. And he could see Black Abe.

The gun-guard of the late Abel Reach was talking low, with furtive glances up and down the street. But Tuss Sloan didn't need to hear. He got the tenor of the words by his gestures, by that coiled length of manila hemp, pristine white under the moon, that he held out alluringly. There was a small knot of men before Abe, the saloon tramps and gun-slick riffraff of the cow city. They kept nodding as they passed a jug around. Tuss saw vicious faces twist around toward the jail-house, his way, as Black Abe went on with his low harangue. Abe brandished the coiled rope once more. Guns began to slide free of holsters down there.

IT WAS plain. Abe was organizing a hang-rope party, a small lynch mob to jump the jail and deal with the killer of Abel Reach. An icy finger seemed to jab Tuss Sloan's spine with the chill touch of the grave itself.

Down at the corner, Abe bent closer to the knot of men. "Did any of you boys ever have to ask Abel twice when you needed some dinero? Did you ever have to go hungry when Abel was here to put his hand in his pocket?" he asked craftily. "Marks, when your sister had them twins that time, who was it brought in the doc? Yeah, Abel Reach!"

Abe was playing a shrewd game. If he could get this Sloan youngster strung up, he figured to be safe himself. Because, otherwise, sooner or later, somebody was due to ask why he hadn't been down in the lobby of the hotel on guard like he was supposed to be. He would have no answer. And that gun-slinging pack would tear him to pieces like so many coyotes, he knew. They would blame him for the loss of their support, their very livelihood.

Black Abe played his final card. "I ain't agin the Law—so long as it takes its course. But I heard some friends of Tobias Sloan a-talking down the road afore... They aim to spring the youngker outa that jail. You—you friends of Abel's—you going to let that happen?"

One of them, reeling slightly as he lowered the jug, bawled, "Damn right we ain't, Abe!" Then they were trailing down behind the blacksmith's barn and the watching Tuss knew they would be coming for him soon. Coming with a ready rope.

But that last bellow down there had roused the jailor. Peering out a front window he was in time to see the conspirators with the rope just before they slid from sight. He came clop-clopping down the hall between the cells, clumsy with the liquor in him, stumbling as he stooped to pick up his gun and lantern at the head of the stairs. He was muttering about his double-barrelled shotgun as he went down below, cursing himself for having left it home. Whispering away as he fumbled with the bar of the front door.

Tuss Sloan gripped the bars of the front of his cell and tried to shake them in vain rage. He was going to die like a cornered rat. That old fool of a jailor wouldn't be able to hold them off more than a minute or so. And Marshal Atters, who represented the Law that had put him here, was down the line drinking. It was like being dry-gulched legally.

There was a dull, drumlike sound from directly overhead on the flat-topped roof of the jail-house. It came again. Tuss wondered if it were the growl of thunder of a gathering storm. Next there was a scraping sound as of metal against metal. Then moonlight flooded through into the second floor corridor. A trapdoor had been opened in the roof.

There were some gruntings from above, a cautious whisper. Then a man was lowered on a rope; he dropped lightly onto the second floor of the jail. A second man came through likewise. A third crouched over the aperture, gun gleaming dully in his hand. Tuss watched, breathless.

Below came Ed the jailor's wheezing voice. "I see you out there, Abe! You an' your danged friends! Now stand back there or—"

From just outside the front door, Black Abe answered low. "Try an' stop us, Ed, an' we'll leave you for buzzard bait!"

"Hey, you Cistos!" the first man from the roof called softly. When the killer twins answered in unison up front, he warned them to be quiet. "Lie low an' we'll snake you outa here faster'n a cow-tail flickin' a fly!" He ran lightly down the stairs to procure the cell keys.

Tuss Sloan was thinking fast and sweat-

ing hard. Below he heard a dull thud that was Ed's body crumpling on the floor. When Abe called again from outside, there was no answer from the jailor.

And Tuss had his chance. That second hombre down from the roof, unaware of his presence in the jail, backed close to the bar-work of his cell front. Lean Tuss sneaked his empty gun through and jabbed it audibly against the man's backbone. The man became petrified as if attacked by a ghost.

"Don't move—or your next step'll be plumb into a Boot Hill grave," he warned in a small but deadly cold voice. Then he was reaching around with his other hand, thumbing shells from the man's gunbelt. A glance at their brass backs in the moonlight showed him they were .45's that would fit his Colt. In a matter of seconds, he was snapping them into his weapon, then getting more from the rigid hombre's belt and shoving them into a pants pocket.

"What the hell—" the other began.

THE first man was returning up the stairs. He had the jailor's lantern hooked over an arm, its rays revealing the rusty cell keys he carried. "We gotta hustle an' fog it fast," he began, then broke off as the lantern light speared down the cell corridor and showed him the tableau. "Holy smoke, Cisto, we come to git you out an'—"

"I'm not Cisto," Tuss Sloan cut him short. "But I aim to git outa this cuartel too. I go along—or at least *one* stays here with me—dead."

The man on the roof returned from a look-see over the edge. "Shake a leg down there, boys! A pack is aimin' to bust into this joint!"

The one with the cell keys swore hoarsely. Without further parleying, he stepped around and prodded a key into the door of Tuss Sloan's cell. It was just as a fence-post slammed into the back-door below, splintering it half off its hinges, that Tuss Sloan glided out of his cell.

"You're with us?" one of the pair answered.

Instinct told the youngster he was casting the die. But he nodded as he jammed down his sombrero. "Yep. I draw chips on your side!" He had no other choice.

The man with the keys ran forward. It was barely a matter of seconds when he came back with the twin Cistos pushing hard on his heels. There was another crash at the rear door below as Abe's bunch ap-

plied their battering ram again. It came ploughing through that time. But the orey-eyed pack of coyotes were in such a hurry to pour through that two tried to jump inside together and got entangled in the splintered wreckage, blocking the way.

Upstairs, one of the Cisto twins and one of the newcomers were hoisting the other Cisto up through the trapdoor. His mate went next. The grim-eyed Tuss had his gun levelled and cocked as they turned to him.

"I'm not staying—alone," he warned once more.

They hesitated but a brief moment. One of them mentioned he looked young as an unlicked doggie. Then they were hoisting him upward as one of the pack below yelled to hustle up and get about stringing up that murdering youngster. The man on the rooftop seized Tuss' wrists and helped him through. The next to the last came up and the rope was dropped through for the final one.

His gun spat in hot streaks down that stairway twice as Black Abe's mob came seething up it. One man screeched like a wild night bird with pain and a body went tumbling down. Below the roof trapdoor, that last gent had slid the rope loop under his armpits. Above they strained to haul him up and through.

Two smokepoles blasted in a series of muzzle-frothings from the stairs. One scored a lucky shot, a once-in-a-lifetime shot. It severed the rope just above the last hombre's head. He went plunging back down as he grappled vainly at thin air. A figure leaped from the top of the stairs and floored him with a slashing gun blow.

The tall man who had remained on the roof closed down the trapdoor with a bang. "Tough break for Trigger," he said. "We'll be lucky to git outa here with our own hides, though."

"Head'll be smokin' mad!" the other hombre husked.

Trigger Spellman below was the boss' right-hand man, the only one from the old bunch that had ridden the owlhoot trail years back. But there was nothing else to do but leave him...

"This way!" the tall, stringy gent who had stayed on the roof called. He was pointing to the white meeting house that reared beside the jail. The shutters of one of its high windows, just above the roof level of the jail, gaped open.

Guns roared madly from the jail's second floor, smashing lead blindly through the trapdoor so that it rattled on its hinges. "They're gone! The prisoners're escaped ... Escaped," voices howled through the spatter of shots. And once again that night, The Bluffs' road exploded into an uproar as the cry went down the line and rushing men started to converge on the jail.

The fugitives were over by the open shutters of the meeting house. The stringy gent led the way into the gallery that ran about the inside of the musty place. Tuss was the second one through. The last man closed the shutters just as somebody poked up the trapdoor of the jail roof.

As they threaded their way between tiers of benches along the gallery, Tuss realized what a slick scheme they had worked out to effect that jail-break. It was tomblike in there with the thick walls muffling the uproar from without. They went in front of the organ at the back of the balcony, down a narrow flight of squeaky stairs. A pack rat scampered away as the leader directed them with a low call. They found their way along the far side of the building to a small door that had been pried open. The leader whistled sharply twice as he stepped out. A couple of men came hopping out of the horse-shed for the church-going folk when a circuit preacher was in town. They led ponies.

They got to them and were swinging up when a lone rider jumped a horse from that peninsula of mesquite in the rear. "Tuss! Tuss! Wait and—" It was Carmencia, a man's coat flapping on her slim shoulders, her legs sheathed in green velvet Mex trousers fringed with pearl buttons. She had been waiting hidden behind the jail.

BUT, unwittingly, she served as a Judas in her anxiety. Some of the mob now swirling around back of the jail heard her. Recognized her call to the youngster accused of slaying Abel Reach. Yapping, guns drawn, they came swirling around behind the meeting house. The stringy hombre had just swung his horse in that direction to make a break for the trackless mesquite jungle. Now, it was too late. The bunch of townsmen blocked them.

A swarm of lead whined about them, followed by the sharp crash of the blended gun reports. One of the Cistos ducked low as a slug caromed off his saddle horn. The stringy leader was swearing the while he

fought his rearing pony around in the other direction. Things had gone wrong from the beginning.

A slug from one of the throng in the rear seared Carmencia's pony. The animal bolted right past them and out into the road as she sawed vainly at the reins. Instinctively Tuss Sloan spurred his animal after her, the others tearing in his wake.

But the last move in the scheme of those jail-breakers was yet to come. It was Trigger Spellman lying back there on the jail-house stairs who cooked up these schemes for the band. And Trigger had a sly brain; he seemed to foresee things. The keen-eyed Tuss saw that big man with the huge sombrero leaping his horse out from the high weeds beside the burnt-out shed across the road. The hombre seemed all head and shoulders piled into his saddle. Scudding clouds had blacked out the moon at the moment.

Neither the onrushing man or the girl spotted each other in time. Their horses crashed shoulder to shoulder, went staggering apart. Carmencia's pony went stumbling sideways back up the road toward the jail. The next moment, she slid from the saddle and was thrown heavily in the dust.

The top-heavy gent's horse was rearing wildly. Two others had come smashing out behind him, flinging down short-gun fire to disconcert the pursuers. The two with Tuss and the Cistos headed down the road toward the end of the town that gave into the broad valley with its little mesas and chimney buttes as the diversion was created. But Tuss himself had wheeled his animal to go after the fallen girl.

A gun fanged the night from atop the jail-house roof. A man up there was throwing down deliberately, Colt steadied across his forearm as he crouched near the front edge. The moon had thrust through again.

"Come on, Boss!" one of the trio from across the road shouted to the froglike rider.

He turned his head, started to throw his animal around. Another flame-slash bit from the jail roof. And the boss half reared in the saddle, then clapped a hand dazedly to the side of his head. The bullet had raked a flesh furrow just under his hat. He went toppling from the saddle to land on hands and knees, hogleg jouncing from his grip.

It all happened in a split second. From the little stoop tacked on the front of the jail, Black Abe leaped out into the road. Two strides and he had flung an arm about

the rising girl and whipped her in front of him as a shield. Shoving his gun out past her, he faced the dazed boss of the lobos. The latter, pawing upward, stared blankly, dazed by his creased skull. Then he slowly went for a shoulder hideout weapon.

Tuss Sloan screamed once. Heeling his cayuse hard, he flung in from the shadowed front of the meeting house. Black Abe's muzzle jerked Tuss' way. Twice it blurted its lethal froth. On the dead run, Tuss hit the dirt on the far side of his pony. Jumping out from behind it, he had his Bowie blade flashing in his left hand and he pounced on Abe. A slug nicked a hunk from Tuss' hat brim. But he kept coming, plowed downward with that knife.

Abe groaned between his teeth and stumbled backward, shirt stained with the blood spurting from a shoulder gash, turning his back like a yellow coyote. It was Tuss Sloan's chance to get himself a human shield. Deadly cool, he seized the cowering Abe by his gun belt from behind, held him with his gun at his back.

"Come at me!" the kid roared to the unorganized, bewildered men down the road. "Come on — an' you'll git yourself a corpse!" He started to back, a little dumfounded at his own ruthlessness. But he hated them all now as only an unfairly-branded outcast of humanity can hate. Something in him had been killed by two things this night; his father's death and his own sentence to a hempen necktie. He had heard a lynch mob coming to kill him. Now, somehow, he knew nothing human could ever put fear in his heart again.

Without a leader, nobody could think what to do for several moments. It was long enough to give the fugitives a break. It was Carmencia who, leaping from Black Abe's grip, grabbed at the bridle of the horse Tuss had been forking. Gamely she tugged the animal to a stop. Then, like an apparition, the froglike boss rolled up into its saddle from the other side. He had his shoulder gun cleared. Reaching down, he swung the slip of a girl up in front of him and turned back down the road.

ONE of the riders who had been lurking in the weeds with the boss let out a cry from behind Tuss. Yanking Black Abe off balance so that he went reeling into the gutter, Tuss caught at the hand the rider extended and managed to clamber up behind him. His eyes were smarting

and swollen from the acrid sting of gunpowder as they high-tailed it down toward the open valley.

But by a tiny, steep-sided mesa, in the fringe of a stand of cottonwoods, the others were waiting. The boss held up a hand for silence as they listened. One of the men nodded. A scattering of hoof-beats was coming from The Bluffs. With the townsmen afoot, there hadn't been time for organized pursuit yet. They moved on, riding at a stiff gallop, until they came to a shallow cut running across the valley. In the shaly bottom was a rut-cut crossroads. From the van, the boss flung an order.

"We'll start splitting up to throw 'em off," he rumbled from under his mountain-sized John B. He jerked a thumb at three of them and told them to take the branch to the south. "We'll all meet up at the camp." Two men with Hack Cisto between them pulled away from the main bunch.

The others pushed on against a cold wind whipping out of the east, riding hard. One of the last things Tuss Sloan remembered clearly was when they stopped at a rocky spring for a breather. Gazing back, he heard one of the men curse and say he could see a posse filing around that chimney butte back where the road had passed over a low, spiny ridge that spiked out from one side of the valley.

The youngster felt himself swaying, head rocking, then slipping from the rump of that outlaw's pony that was carrying double. A little later, he became aware that he was riding in front of a man who was holding him on the horse. He could remember now, like something out of a dream, how the desperate Black Abe had whacked him with his gun barrel as they closed that last time. Whacked him in the exact same spot where his dad's murderer had gun-whipped him one.

The ponies were plashing through creek water. From a long way off, the boss' voice came to Tuss. "We'll go downstream. You three go up and cut through that chaparral jungle..." Tuss knew the horse under him was moving again. Once he propped open his eyes and saw the two with him, one holding him in front of him. But neither was the boss, of course... He sensed something wrong. It dawned on him. Carmencia. She had been riding with the boss. But it was too late to do anything now...

When he woke to grope for his senses again, a beard-stubbed man was spooning some hot stew into his mouth. His head reeled at first when he tried to sit up and he felt the rude bandage ringing it. His left shoulder was very stiff but it didn't hurt much. Through a doorway, he saw the red ball of setting sun sliced by the lip of a cliff. He realized he was in a rude cabin, on a pile of smelly blankets.

The beard-stubbed man shoved a cup of coffee at him, "Drink this. The boss is waitin' to see you."

After Tuss got that down, he realized there had been a shot of red-eye in it. But it made him feel better. He was able to stand easily. They moved outside and he saw they were in a rough, typical camp in a hollow formed by a giant pot-hole scooped in ages long past. All around low but sheer smooth walls of stone reared like a rocky stockade. There was a line of stunted trees on the side on which they stood. Other cabins were scattered through them. Down opposite the campfire was a bigger one with a porch across the front of it. They headed for it. Tuss blinked in the crimson glow of the dying day, then noted the sentry perched on a big boulder down at the end of the clearing, a rifle slung across his knees. Beyond him, a dark maw of a water-cut tunnel gaped. It was the only way in or out of the bowl. It was a natural fortress.

Before they got to the biggest cabin, his senses clearing fast, Tuss realized his waistband felt strange. When he looked down, he saw his Colt wasn't where he had tucked it. He started, pulled up short. That gun had been his dad's and—

The lobo with him read his mind. "Don't worry, kid. Your hogleg ain't lost." He turned him up the steps of the porch of the main cabin. "Here he is, Rio. Finally brought him around."

Rio was the gangling hairpin with the projecting Adams apple who had worked things from the jail roof last night. Rio nodded his brick-red face as he lolled against the doorway, hand drooping over a gun stock. He yanked open the door. "Here's the kid, Head," he called inside.

That name—"Head"—rang a bell in Tuss Sloan's mind. He recalled now hearing it in the gun melee after the jail-break. Immediately he thought of Head Haggars, his dad's old outlaw pard. He stepped in and saw the short but massive-shouldered, frog-like boss of the night before. And now,

with his mammoth sombrero off, in the light of a couple of guttering candles, Tuss realized what a massive iron-gray head the man had. Then he knew.

It was Head Hagers. . . .

HE WAS seated astride a chair back of the table. He seemed all huge skull and shoulders, the rest of his short body dwarfed by those two. He had a broad splotch of a red-veined face, leathery, with undersized features. They made his head look even huger. The shock of gray-tinged hair sweeping back from that face added to the effect. He nodded the great head.

"Yep, I'm Head Hagers. Reckon you heard of me plenty, huh." His languid rumble of a voice had a bragging note.

Tuss nodded. "Yeah, I have." He didn't say any more then. He was thinking of how Head and his dad had parted enemies, in gun-smoke. And at the same moment, he saw little Carmencia on a chair in a shadowy corner of the front room of the place. Impulsively he started toward her. She was smiling at seeing him.

Head Hagers rapped the table so that the greasy plate in front of him jumped. "Stand still! I'm talking to you now, saddle-bum. Head Hagers doesn't waste parleying with every man. Me, Head, I ain't no two-bit sneakin' coyote of a hoss-stealin' lobo! You know who I am," he spat imperiously, then put a quirk in the center of his undersized mouth.

"Yeah—I know," Tuss said softly. But he was some surprised. This boastful hombre didn't seem like the quiet-spoken, smiling lobo leader his dad had told him about.

He heard a snicker on his right. Over there the two Cistos were lolling on a bench, both chewing in unison. Head belched, then picked up a whisky bottle at his side and gurgled deep. Some ran down his chin and onto the white calfskin vest over his maroon shirt. Young Tuss' expression remained poker-faced but his round gray eyes tightened a moment. His dad had said he had only seen Head Hager take a drink twice in his life, once when a close friend was shot dead and another time when his pet pony was mortally wounded under him.

He thought back on the last that had been heard of the famous Head before the recent rumors of his reappearance. The story went that the outlaw chieftain had

been badly wounded so that he was crippled for life in protecting a fugitive prisoner from a lynch-mad mob. When it was later determined that the prisoner was absolutely innocent, the maimed Head had been given a pardon by the governor. And one night he had disappeared from the sick bed where he had been convalescing. Had simply dropped out of sight, out of life apparently.

The man across the table from Tuss hoisted the bottle again, cursing obscenely when the mouth knocked against his teeth. Somehow he didn't fit the picture Tuss' dad had drawn of Head Hagers. The Head it was said always aimed for a man's legs rather than kill him. The Head who would swing a herd of wet ponies over the Rio, then give every cent he got from them to some needy sod-buster or busted rancher. The Head who liked the careless life of the open trail, who stole only when he needed it, and then from those who would never miss it. The Head who had reminded young Tuss of that Robin Hood he used to read about in his schoolbooks.

A voice from behind the lobo boss said, "You're drinking like a slob, Head!" And a tall, hard-faced woman with dyed hair stalked out of one of the rear rooms. She wore whipcord riding breeches and a man's shirt open at the throat. She had agate eyes that might have been stolen from a buzzard. As she walked, she swayed a little.

Tuss stared. She should have had a be-spangled dance-hall hussy's frock, cut low. Cheap jewelry blazing from that dyed hair. Painted cheeks. Then he knew that that was what she must have been once. She dropped into a chair beside Head and demanded a cigaret. Almost servilely he passed her a package of tailor-made ones.

"This is him—the shootin' fool!" Head said, jabbing a dirty thumb Tuss Sloan's way, grinning crookedly. "Ain't hardly bigger 'n a minute but he's snake-fast an' cold as death with a hogleg. A lead-eatin' trigger slammer if I ever saw one . . . I figgered for one man. Two can do the job better. Ain't that right, Doll?"

The woman's eyes raked Tuss as if he were a piece of beef critter for sale. After a while, she said "Yes" and blew a smoke ring.

Head started for the bottle, shot her a furtive look, then drew his hand back. He eyed Tuss. "A gun-ridin' devil! What's your name?"

Tuss swallowed once. Some instinct cautioned him. He said, "You can call me 'Smith'." He remembered how his dad and Head had parted enemies, as his father would sadly tell it. And he had head enough to know his life rested in this man's hands now. A hang-rope was waiting for him.

"Smith, huh? Okay. Shooter Smith, we'll make it. You killed somebody back down there."

Tuss shook his head. "They said I did. I didn't."

Head snorted. "Sure, sure. But they was goin' to hang you for it. So what's the difference? Dead men don't talk much or—"

"Get down to business, Head," the woman, Doll, said.

Head's jaw shot out and his eyes shifted to take in the Cisto twins as well as Tuss. "You pack-rats was all slated to die. I saved you. I hope you can appreciate that An'—an'—savvy this—I can turn you back over to the Law any time I want."

SQUINT CISTO rose quickly, body moving with a snakelike motion. "Sure, sure, Head. Me an' Hack's good gun-hands. We'll be glad to ride with your outfit and—"

Head said, "You'll ride for me—one of you two. An' the Shooter jasper there. The other one of you Cistos stays as hostage. For him," he thumbed at Tuss again, "the girl'll be hostage for him."

Tuss felt himself stiffen, his lips curl against his teeth. He got out, "How?"

Head chuckled. "It's your chance for life. . . . I got a hombre I want dealt the Boot Hill card. *Sabe?* Name of Long. John Long. I want him dead. Back-shootin' or any other way you want."

"We know how to handle them kinda things," Squint Cisto said, chuckling drily.

"Okay," Head said. "He's got a little locket hangin' 'round his neck, this—this John Long. Picture of a woman in it. When you bring that back to me, I'll know he's dead." He rose, throwing out his big chest. "This John Long—he's in Last Stop now"

In the tense, fraught stillness, they heard the scrape of a knife on a tin plate out in the clearing. Hack Cisto half rose, lips loose so that he drooled. "Last Stop?" he croaked.

Tuss Sloan made no sound. Just once,

his eyes swivelled to Carmencia back in the corner. Something passed between them and then her head sunk sadly. She looked as if she had been about to speak, then realized she couldn't for some reason.

Tuss knew there was cold sweat on his forehead. That his hands had taloned, hooklike. But he gave no other sign though he knew of Last Stop well enough. It was the end of the trail for the broken-down lobos and tin-horn gun-slicks and riffraff of the out-trails. It was a little squatter's place crouched on a morass across a deep-cut river from a big range town, Lone Butte. A festering sore-hole allowed to exist within the confines of its own wretchedness.

But there was one unwritten law laid down by big, prosperous Lone Butte that permitted it to be. When a man crossed in to Last Stop, he could not come out. The only way out was back through Lone Butte. And that was forbidden at gun-point. Nobody had ever heard of an hombre who did come out.

The Cistos blurted that together. "But a gent goes in there—an' he's as good as dead! Hell, he can't git out—without dyin'! He—"

Head Haggars nodded. "That's your problem, gents."

Hack Cisto, ghastly as cold ashes, coughed tearingly and was so stricken at facing certain death that he reacted instinctively. He clawed inside his shirt for a hide out gun he no longer possessed. In a split second, he looked terribly foolish. In that same split second, a Colt leaped from under Head Haggars' vest and licked out flame. And Hack of the Cisto pair was slammed back against the wall, his gun-slinging arm broken by Head's bullet. Hack stood chewing oaths.

It was the fastest draw Tuss Sloan had ever seen, that gun-snatching act of Head's. So speedy it was like something you've seen when blinking and not sure you've seen it at all. And as the evening breeze whisked the smoke from over the table, Tuss realized the woman, Doll, had plucked a .41 derringer from her bosom. Had it levelled. Tuss knew that gun had the muzzle velocity to bowl over a bull at close range. Rio had jumped forward with both hands filled.

Head grinned coldly. "Okay? Any more arguments? That leaves it up to you to go, Squint Cisto. Go—or go back to the Law. Cross me up—and your brother dies."

"I'll go," Squint said woodenly.

Head looked at Tuss. "The girl—how'll I know she'll be all right?" the younker demanded hoarsely.

Doll answered before Head could. "They'll be no foolin' around here," she said coldly. Her eyes glittered jealously. "The girl'll be all right—the scared little snip! Acts like she's too good for some folks!"

Tuss nodded. "I'll go—and I'll be back."

Rising swiftly, Carmencia started for him. But Doll blocked her path. Head pulled his sombrero to one side to reveal guns on the table. One he slid toward Squint Cisto.

"They're empty. Rio'll give you shells" Head shoved forward Tuss' with the black spade emblem on its ivory stock. "Right fancy shooting iron, that one," he added.

Tuss' mouth jerked wide then. Fortunately Head was reaching for the bottle as Doll went back to the bedroom, didn't see the kid. Tuss was dumbfounded. For Head Haggars should have recognized that Colt. Tuss' dad, Tobias, had worn it when he rode with Head in the old days.

IT WAS two days later. Tuss Sloan and Squint Cisto, two mute figures powdered with trail dust, forked their ponies slowly through Lone Butte. Squint had a bottle of redeye in his saddle roll. He took it out again, the sixth time in the last half hour, and sucked greedily from it. Tuss eyed him coldly.

Squint swore. "It's like putting the double-cross on a gent and tellin' him about it first and—"

Tuss said, "It was that or your neck. You were in jail."

"Well, I might uh got out uh there and—"

"You'd be squawking if you was going to be hung with a new rope," Tuss told him with cold humor. "Save your wind. We got to drop a loop on this hairpin an' then try to smoke our way out!"

A fog was blowing down from the north along the river, wafting jagged wisps of fleecy tendrils along the earth, over buildings. The big cowtown fell behind them as they took the curving road toward the steep river banks. They went down a gentle slope past a Mex settlement of cracking dobies, moving between lines of yellow pine. Then they were at the head of the steep drop to the oily-looking river below.

Squint jerked at the bridle savagely, snak-

ing eyes running around wildly in the deep sockets. He wanted to quit, to turn back. But the blood bond between his twin and himself was too much even for his own yellow streak. He kicked his heels into his cayuse.

"Adios," a man called halfway down. He was sitting on the porch of a little cabin backed against a rock cut. It commanded a view right down the road to the river and across it to the dull shapes of the hovels that comprised Last Stop. A rifle stood slanted against the wall beside him and a couple of six-gun weighted holsters were slung at his waist. Another man came to the doorway and peered out as he spoke. They were the Lone Butte sentinels.

Tuss Sloan fought against the clammy shudder that seemed to take possession of his body. His lips were white over his teeth as he led the way down to the water edge and the shaky foot-bridge that led out over it. The mist wreaths were thicker down there. Leading his pony, Tuss started across first. He thought of Carmencia again, of the stark expression on her face when Head Haggars had announced his deal in exchange for their freedom.

He tried to tell himself that he wasn't doing it for her. He was no fool; he had been betrayed by her in the first place. Yet, it didn't make much difference. He had been doomed anyway. They had forced him at the verge of a lynching onto the Gunshot Road, into the fraternity of trigger-slayers. And the hombres who took that road had to die sometime. This way, he told himself, he wouldn't be kept waiting. It was a grisly joke.

Then a hollow laugh floated out to them over the soft-purling water. Another moment and they sighted the other bank. A one-armed figure, phantomlike in the mist, stood gibbering at them a moment.

"Company, eh," he chuckled. Then he went skulking away over the soggy earth to blend with a cluster of the miserable hovels.

The pair picked their way along a narrow, perpetually muddy street, around a tortuous bend. Low lights from a little barroom with rag-patched windows spiked feebly out at them. They could see a line of men at the counter inside. But it was as if they had been summoned from a graveyard to some unearthly whisky-mill. Neither music nor laughter issued from inside. A man coughed and it floated loudly down the street.

Tuss spotted a figure almost blended with

the tree before a one-storied General Store. "John Long live down this way?" Tuss called. Somehow his own voice sounded hollow, mocking.

The man spat once, nodded, and pointed down an alley of squalid little places set on low stilts, some of them leaning drunkenly. "Last place is Long's," the man said without moving.

By feel rather than by sight, almost, they made their way into the alley. The only sound was the dank dripping of eaves. Faintly, from across the stream, came a dog's bark. It sounded like something from another earth.

"This one," Squint Cisto breathed hoarsely, dropping his reins, plucking at his holster.

Tuss felt of his ivory stock, slung forward in that sheath one of Head Haggers' men had given him. And then he realized this was the thing he had feared most of all—all the time. This coming to smoke down a man who might be innocent of anything. Serving as a hired killer for a lobo snake. Creeping in like a coyote to vent the brand of some stranger. Then he remembered Carmencia and he strode up the beaten dirt path toward the place. A wan streamer of lamplight ran from the single front window.

Squint Cisto scuttled sideward behind Tuss, moving toward a little clump of brush. "I'll lay for him here—when you call him out," he husked. At the door, Tuss knocked twice. There was no answer. Twice more he pounded, heavier this time. The house creaked in the rising wind. Tuss called the gent's name. "Long—John Long! Long!"

"Who're you?" a man called.

Tuss whirled, springing sideward lest by some chance this John Long suspected the trap. He was over in the faint light from the window and it dyed the side of him where that ivory-butted gun sagged his belt. But he wasn't aware of thus silhouetting himself at the moment. His eyes were stabbing the dimness laced with the deceptive shrouding of fog. He did not draw. This was the way he had to do it. Face his man squarely and call him to fill his hand.

"I'm Long . . . Who're you?" the bodiless voice demanded.

For some reason, Tuss Sloan remembered a thing his dad had told him about Head Haggers then. How Head had veritable cat-eyes, seeing in the dark as if by magic.

Tuss's huge hands were trembling, knocking against his thighs. He started to speak.

"Don't make a move for your gun, fella! An' tell your pard behind the bush I'll blow his shirt buttons through his backbone if he makes a play," the voice out there warned. It was a soft voice yet somehow it had the chill of cold steel in it.

A strangled sound came from Squint as he rolled over in the mud to get near the corner of the house. His nerve had run out on him. He was scrambling away on hands and knees, back turned. A vicious killer, he didn't know how to play it when he didn't have the drop.

"Set down where you are," the voice called, but closer. "You—you by the window—turn some—there—now. You—" Stark surprise made that voice tremble a moment. "Why you must be—not Tobias—you must be his boy! Tobias Sloan's younker!"

Tuss wondered if he were losing his mind. "I—I—how do you know that?" he croaked.

"By that ivory-butted gun with the black spade sign set in the butt," the voice said. It was approaching now.

It seemed to materialize out of the wisps of fog, a huge-chested man with a gigantic head, hopping along with wonderful agility on the crutch that supplanted his right leg, missing from the knee down. A gun spiked from his other hand. A cocked gun.

"I know 'bout that gun 'cause I rid with your pop, Tobias, long time back, son. I'm Head Haggers."

SOMEHOW, the moment he said it, looking at him, Tuss Sloan knew it was so. It didn't make sense but it was so. This top-heavy man with the leonine head and the big, generous if homely features with the grinning eyes all puckered up now—this would be the famed Head Haggers. The man who had been driven down the owlhoot trail. The man who never tried to kill, who was always ready to help the poor, helpless devil.

"Go by the name of John Long around here since I come," he said gruffly. But his eyes were on that Cisto, his gun bore unwavering on him too.

There was a moment of silence. Then Cisto rose and came over sheepishly.

"I'm Tuss Sloan—Tobias' son," the younker said.

Head Haggers was pinning them with

deep-probing eyes. "You came to shoot me," he said very quietly.

Cisto tried to laugh in a feeble way. "It was—it was Head Haggars who sent us," he spat out hoarsely.

The real Head stared. Young Tuss nodded at him.

"He said he was you, Head Haggars," the kid tried to explain though it sounded horribly false now down in this dreg-end of humanity. "He's posing as you, Head."

The genuine Head spat disgustedly into the moisture beside the plank leading to his front step. "You—Tobe Sloan's son—hiring yourself out as a killer! Why your pop would gun-whip you himself until—"

Tuss said, "Dad's dead. He got killed a few nights back. That's why I'm here. I started after his killer and they were going to hang me. So—"

Flipping his crutch deftly past them, Head shoved open his front door. With a nod of his head, he commanded them to enter. His big Colt was still dangling by a huge finger through the trigger guard when they sat around the little calico-clothed table in his kitchen. Then he bade Tuss tell him the whole story. First off, he wanted to know about Tobe's death.

"It all hooks up. Dad's gettin' gunned in the back was the beginning of it all," Tuss began. And he told about that horrible night out at the ranch. And how he had recognized the assailant by that arm scar and gone in to face him. How the man had been shot in the back himself by somebody else and how he was almost hanged for it before the gunhands of the hombre who was calling himself "Head Haggars" had snaked him out of that jail.

"Who was this gent who dry-gulched Tobe?" Head broke in, scratching his thinning gray hair in puzzlement.

Tuss hadn't said because he didn't figure the name would mean anything to Head. "A lawyer in Union Bluffs name of Abel Reach," he said.

"Abel Reach?" Head leaped half out of his chair. "Abel is dead?" . . . 'S funny . . . that makes me a rich man, I reckon." He sat down slowly, then shook his head at Tuss. "Abel never shot your pop—in the back or nohow."

"But I saw him—I saw him with his scarred left arm, anyways—clear as day under the moon and—" Tuss began hotly.

Head lifted a hand for silence. He had a commanding way about him. "I knew

Abel from a long way back. He was no killer. The sight of blood sickened him like he was a lily-livered woman. That was how I captured him in the fust place"

It was years back, before Head Haggars had taken the owl-hoot trail. A young deputy, proud of his glistening badge, down in the Panhandle. They were tracking down some rustlers for a job in which a bunk-house hand had been mortally wounded. The man afterward known as Abel Reach had been charged with the shooting by witnesses. And Head himself, working off alone, had cornered Abel and another of the gang in an arroyo. Shot it out with them. As he had charged in close, Abel had nicked him across the cheek with a bullet. The blood had leaped from the face scratch.

"That Abel screeched like a woman in child-birth and threw down his gun an' surrendered," Head said, recalling it with sad eyes. "I'd wounded his pard bad. An' he confessed to the killing of the ranch-hand when he figgered he was dying." Then he had seemed to pass out on the Long, Long Trail.

Head had let Abel Reach go, knowing about that newly-born baby daughter he had on his quarter-section. Deliberately let him escape because he knew that posse would string him up on sight when they caught up with them. Only Fate had dealt the cards against Head Haggars that day. The wounded rustler had miraculously lived. And when he came around, it was to deny any part in the fatal gunning as well as to tell how the deputy, Head, had allowed Abel to escape.

It had been then that Head Haggars had been forced down the owlhoot trail, branded a renegade law officer.

"Abel had promised me anything he had to let him go that morning," Head finished musingly. "I sorta forgot about that part of it. Years later, I ran into him. He was on his way up then, right successful, his name changed. Asked me what I wanted." Head chuckled. "I didn't want nothin' them days. But he swore then that when he died, he'd leave me all he had. Abel was the kind who couldn't forget a debt—he was plumb afeared of dyin' with any unpaid."

A little while back, Head had picked up a much-delayed letter from Abel telling him he was made sole heir in his will and that

said will was filed in the county courthouse and a copy of it with the town marshal, Atters.

"But Abel—he might've been greedy and crooked in business dealing—but he was no killer, Tuss. Much less doin' it with his own hand. He couldn't have. I know him too well. Blood drove him sorta cryin'-crazy."

Squint Cisto sat there with a sneer now. It was plain he could not understand any man being motivated by Head's decent feelings. "If you're Head Haggars, why're you known here as Long?" he asked.

"He's Head—I know that," Tuss snapped, now more baffled than ever. If it wasn't Abel who had backshot his dad. . .

"When I got this," Head said mildly, patting his stub of leg, "I knew I was finished with the gun-trails. I was plumb busted. But I didn't want no man a-pitying me. So I came here—under that name. But I can't figger how folks'd be so plumb lunkheaded to be fooled by somebody callin' himself me. Why—"

"He looks mighty like you—if a gent hadn't seen you himself, Head," Tuss said. "All chest like you. An' almost as big a head. 'Cept he drinks right heavy. He's got a woman with him called—"

"Doll?" Head asked quickly. When Tuss nodded, he whacked the table with the flat of his hand like a pistol-shot. "Then Satch Burr is outa prison—where I put him!"

Satch Burr had ridden with his bunch once, a loud-mouthed gunny who always figured he was right smart. One night, Head had seen him throw down on an old enemy in a barroom. Throw down on him from behind, wounding him badly. It was Head himself who had turned Satch Burr over to the Law.

"I never could stomach back-shootin'," he explained, added thoughtfully, "Must've told Satch about Abel Reach's will sometime, I reckon. And now—"

Head Hagger's genial eyes seemed to turn to stone. "Now—I *sabe*. Satch always was a smart one. He figgers, playing my role, to walk in an' collect, that dirty, back-shooting snake!" His great head seemed to swell with rage, the veins bulging in his temples, jaw grinding. "I gotta stop that—yes. We're leaving here!"

Squint Cisto threw back his flat face and laughed jeeringly. "Yeah—sure. On a plank then if they don't bury 'em on this side."

One of Head's big fists curled. Then he hooked his crutch to him and swung to the door. "Wait. I'll be back *pronto pronto*."

It seemed scarcely minutes before he did return despite their tenseness. He quickly dragged a slicker off a wall hook and beckoned with his head as he patted his holster. "We're going."

"Where?" Cisto demanded.

"Outa Last Stop—and alive," Head Haggars said confidently. Outside, they waited while he brought a rugged little clay-bank pony from a shed in the rear.

Standing there in the mist, Tuss Sloan was quickly piecing things together. How Satch Burr, impersonating the real Head, was afraid the latter might somehow come out of Last Stop. It was the one thing that could seem to ruin his sly scheme. So he had snaked two deadly killer twins from the leaky Bluffs jail to finish off the real Head for him. Only he had gotten an extra gunhand when Tuss himself had drawn chips in the game in desperation.

Head came back with his pony, then whistled softly. Two shabby figures, one tall and the other sawed off, materialized from the back end of the alley. Head just nodded and they dropped into the line as the little cavalcade made its crooked way down to the river. Through the thick mist, they crossed. A little way up the steep climb, Head stepped forward and gravely shook hands with the mysterious pair who had joined them. The two turned and plodded uphill alone, one of them slipping his hip gun up inside his shirt.

"We'll follow a little ways after 'em," Head ordered . . . "I'm collectin' some of my debts tonight. Them two—well, I helped 'em both outa tight places on the gun-trails once. The tall one, well, he's a lunger with a foot in the grave already. The other broke outa the Big House a few weeks back an' he knew the Special State officers had tracked him this far anyway."

Hugging close to the steep cuts of the road up the treeless, brushless bank, they started to follow. Ahead, Tuss sighted the fire blazing before that cabin where the guards had saluted them on their way in. Cisto went for his hogleg but Head dropped a hand on his arm.

From ahead, where the pair were, the words came back. "We're givin' ourselves up." Dim black shapes stepped out to block their way. Then the four up ahead

moved toward the cabin off the road. With a powerful leap, Head set the example and flung himself into the saddle. He stabbed his crutch into the rifle boot, then waited with upheld arm. There was a sharp outcry. Then the three of them were spurring the ponies up the sharp slope.

They got opposite the fire. The little man was wrestling with one of the guards. There was a muffled explosion. The little one's body caved in. But as he sank, in his dying throes, he grabbed the guard's legs and hauled him down with him. Two quick splatterings of flame crisscrossed in the doorway of the cabin. Clutching at a widening red splotch on his shirt front, the tall gent came spinning out in front. He managed to wave once with his wobbly gun before he jack-knifed to the ground. But there was no further sign of activity from within where the other guard was.

"Square-shooting gents," Head cried in grim benediction as they hightailed it past and up to the top by the Mex settlement. In another moment, he was leading them in a tortuous course through its dobie hovels as they crouched low in the saddles. A short time later, they emerged far down on Lone Butte's main street. It was deserted, everybody in the town having poured out in response to the sounds of battle down by the guarded road out of Last Stop.

The three moved out onto the open stage-coach road at a stiff lope. Cisto was growling away. "That double-crossin' Burr snake! That double-crossin' Burr snake. He weren't Head an'—say, why couldn't we uh left Last Stop by a back route?"

Head answered as he bit off a plug of chaw tobacco. "Because it's an island in a swamp. She's morass on the other three sides that not even a snake could uh git across. Mebbe you—" He eyed Cisto speculatively as they headed for Union Bluffs.

BACK there, in the jail-house, Black Abe with some of Abel Reach's former gun-guards bent low over the prone figure on the floor. It was Trigger Spellman, the fake Head's lieutenant who had been captured the night of the jail-break. Abe glanced at Ed the jailor, snoring stentoriously with his head flung beside the empty bottle on the desk. Black Abe was dripping sweat. It was hot in there with the old pot-bellied stove working. But they needed it for that running-iron they were using. The dawn was about to break.

A man came in with a bucket of water and sloshed it over Trigger's head. The latter had passed out cold. Abe cursed and rammed his boot into the prone man's ribs. Trigger's agony-wrenched eyes flickered open. In a flash, the hulking Abe seized the branding-iron from the coals and bent over the prisoner's bared belly. The flesh there was already slashed with knife cuts that welled an ugly red.

"Gawd—" Trigger moaned weakly.

"I'm a-findin' out why they wanted them three outa this jail—an' if it was Head Haggars' outfit," Abe mumbled. Then he jabbed down into the belly flesh with the running-iron and the odor of charred flesh made even the toughest of them recoil.

Trigger Spellman's nerve didn't exactly break them. He just went out of his mind with the agony of it. And a loose sack of pain-twisted flesh half out of this world, he lay there and babbled. Babbled the story of Satch Burr posing as Head Haggars on the strength of his strange physical resemblance. His broken-down mind went back into the past and he moaned out past talks with Burr as they had put their scheme together. The trick of snaking the Cistos out of the jail to hold one as hostage and send the other snake on the man-hunt.

Froth almost choked off some of Trigger's words. His talk was in raving snatches. Disjointed. Babbled bits. But Black Abe was able to piece it together. He glanced out, a queer, greedy light raging behind his pupils.

"If we can git the real Head dead or alive—we can prove this Burr is a fake. And," his voice dropped to a thin whisper, "when the real Head Haggars is dead, me, I—" He whirled and rushed out the door, eaten with the itch to get riding down the trail to Last Stop. He was like a man seeing the world ready to drop like a ripe plum in his lap

The weary trio, having driven themselves hard for Union Bluffs, pulled up in the late afternoon in a thicket up the gulch a little from Broken Wheel Junction. The Junction lay just across the ridge from Union Bluffs. Head Haggars mopped sweat from his high brow with a ragged bandanna as he stared at the thunderheads building in the northeast. Then his eyes shifted back to the little settlement down the gulch.

"I don't like that trail-drag we seen the other side of the town there when we was higher up, Tuss," Head mentioned. "You

got to remember—you're still a wanted man—a killer in the eyes of the Law."

"I ain't aiming to eat crow now," Tuss said stiffly.

Head grinned a little. But he knew the tricks of the out-trails from way back when. Over to one side, Cisto sat sullen-mouthed. Head had relieved him of his gun as they caught a brief snatch of shut-eye the first night out. Head gestured to him.

"Cisto, ride in an' take a look-see."

The squint-eyed twin curled his lip. "Say, some of them bounty-huntin' dirty danged law-wolves is a-lookin' for me too an'—"

Head drilled him with his fierce eyes. "I'm a-promisin' you again to stick with us till the showdown an' I'll see you git shaken free."

Cisto shrugged and rode off. They saw him enter the settlement. But it was a long time before he came back up the trail. "Nobody much 'round but a coupla drunken horse-traders what just came in with some mares," he told them.

"That'd be the cloud o' trail dust I saw," Head said. And they rode into the sparsely-settled place as the first fat drops of rain spattered the alkali.

Cisto looked cheerful for the first time. "I aim to wash some of the trail dirt off my tonsils afore I die," he announced. "What do you say? I'll set 'em up."

Head nodded thoughtfully. "Something tells me this is one of the few times I could use a little redeye." Actually, his aged, crippled body was wracked by the agony of the long ride.

Cisto dropped off spryly and led the way into the town's little store that had a tiny bar counter on one side. Eyes red from lack of sleep, skull throbbing a little under that now dirty, ragged head bandage, Tuss Sloan stood staring straight ahead at blank wall as the other two ordered.

He saw the whole picture now, understood the crooked game Satch Burr was backing with his last card to the final hand. But there was one thing still left unsettled. And that was the most important thing to him. It was who had slain his father. If it wasn't Abel Reach—

He heard a choked cry from the rear of the store. The next moment, with an oversized sombrero atumble on her sleek black hair, Carmencia was throwing herself into his arms. For the first time since he had seen his dad sink to his death,

something warm flowed in Tuss Sloan, something he thought he had forgotten.

Then she was pushing herself back from him, blinking through tears, looking slightly ridiculous in her ill-fitting man's garb. She blurted crazy-seeming words.

"Tuss—you never killed Abel Reach. I knew it—knew it even as I ran screaming it. I was crazy, I guess. It was Doll who did it, that Doll, the woman with Head Haggars. I—you—I—" The words jumbled as she tried to fight off hysterics.

Stepping over, Head shook her stiffly, took her little chin and jerked it sideways a few times. She blinked, then was calm though trembling. She had seen a woman dart from the room next to Abel's office across the hall to one of the back rooms. The woman had worn a dark cloak such as her mother had. She thought it had been her mother who, learning she had been tricked up there by the lawyer, had come to settle with him. And had, in lead. She was reacting instinctively when she shouted Tuss' name, trying to protect her mother.

"But after they took you away to the jail, I slipped back in there," Carmencia said. And she had found a white leather woman's glove in the room beside Abel Reach's office. A glove with gunpowder stains on it. And it had not been her mother's, she knew. She had gone down to the jail to try and get the news to Tuss and been involved in the jail-break.

Cisto was peering at her, licking his lips nervously. "When we got out to that outlaw camp that night, I was still awake. That Doll had just got in before us, Tuss" Carmencia's rich eyes shone. "She was wearing only one glove, the mate of the one I had."

But the girl had had no chance to get the information to Tuss before he went off on his man-hunt mission to Last Stop. Two days later, she had escaped from the camp with Doll's help. Burr's woman was jealous of the way Burr looked at the girl.

"If I only could have told you before you put your head in a noose," she said, fighting back a dry sob.

She had returned to The Bluffs to try and enlist Marshal Atters' aid. And then, the bogus Head Haggars had ridden in with his band, prepared to collect his inherited kingdom by Abel Reach's will. He was there now.

"He's going to run for marshal in to-

morrow's elections, too," she hurried on. "He—"

"This is the real Head," Tuss started to introduce her.

But she cut him short as she gasped for breath. "Tuss, there's one thing that's got me scared. Sam Atters told me it—it's sort of a secret. The last clause in Abel Reach's will says that if Head Haggars should be dead, his fortune would go to Black Abe. Abe was his second cousin."

Tuss tried to keep his voice steady. "I don't think Abe will do any inheriting now with Head himself—"

Carmencia clutched at his arm. She couldn't get the words out fast enough. "But Abe—Black Abe—he's here. He rode in just after I did. I saw him from the house where I was eating. Tuss, I'm so afraid—"

Cisto snickered. "Why that Abe gent can't be here. He—"

"Why I saw you talkin' to him," the girl cried huskily. "You came in here a long while. I was afraid to come out until I saw Tuss come and—"

Cisto leaped into action, ripping his shirt apart as he went for the gun Abe had given him. Squint Cisto was out for something himself and he had made a deal with Abe. He had them beaten to the draw, now. Then there was a terrific *swish* sound.

Head Hagger hadn't tried for his holster when he saw it was too late. Balancing on his one leg, he flailed with his clutch like a scythe. The butt end carved open a gash on Cisto's low forehead as he was catapulted backward through the doorway.

Up from the cover of the front stairs of the store, where they had bellied up outside, rose Black Abe and five of Reach's former barroom toughs. Abe had given his orders. To throw a blinding barrage of lead into the place and mow them down as they stood crowded at the bar. Including Cisto. Abe wasn't splitting with anybody. And it was Cisto, face writhing in a final snaky grimace, who took the brunt of that first volley full in his flying back. He was a corpse before he bounced on the floor.

It was a short gunfight. Tuss' first two shots drilled Black Abe, picturing himself as an heir, plumb center. He flung both hands at his chest as if he would claw out the lead talons that had fastened deep into his lungs. Then he vomited life-blood once and spun to pitch down the steps.

Their plan back-firing in the first split-second, the others wanted no more of it.

It was over, those saloon-toughs pelting it up the gulch, scattering through the scrub growth.

IT WAS just a little after daybreak of the next day. Rio, who had been moved up to Satch Burr's first lieutenant with Trigger gone, felt like patting his thin chest as he paced the wooden sidewalk in front of The Bluffs' hotel. This was election day. And aside from his boss coming into one big chunk of dinero already, he was going to be marshal. Rio and the men were going to see to that. They had their trigger fingers prodding to close in on the voting place in the big General Store when the first voter dared show his face.

Rio felt mighty good. Because when the boss became marshal, he, Rio, would deal out the gun-law of the town. But this would be a new experience for him. This time he would handle a holster from behind the protection of a badge. He sneered down at the ramshackle jail-house where he knew the former marshal, the scared little Atters, had been crouching all night. Then he saw the trio around the corner of the jail-house in the opaque light of the half-born day.

The three riders halted a moment and talked as white-haired Atters moved fearfully out onto the little stoop. The next moment, he was heartily pumping the hand of the big man of that trio. Rio rubbed his eyes. Something about that big man was danged familiar.

Then two of the riders were coming on again. The third had swung out of sight back behind the jail building. One of his men called over to Rio but he waved him silent impatiently. Behind the two riders, some of the older townsmen were moving out of the jail, hands over holster tops in a business-like way. Down by the blacksmith shop, the proprietor poked his head out the barndoor cautiously, then roared:

"Howdy, Head Haggars! How be you?"

Head? Rio, scowling in perplexity, glanced over his shoulders to that corner of the hotel where "Abel Reach" was lettered in gold on several windows. Why Head had spent the night up there with Doll in the suite of the man from whom he had inherited! And they hadn't come down yet. Rio knew.

The thin drizzle, that had ceased just before daybreak, trickled out of the leaden

skies again, blurring things. Running forward, Rio swore as he slipped on the sidewalk and tried to peer ahead. Then, too late, he noted that crutch stuck in the rifle boot of the huge-shouldered man's kak. Rio started to yip, grabbing for his gun. He tried to run backward too.

But that huge-headed rider, Head Hagers himself, had whipped that crutch out, was whipping it in a vicious circle. There was a crunching sound. Rio's sombrero rolled across the sidewalk. And he sagged backward over an empty water-trough very uncomfortably. He knew nothing about that. His skull had been cracked in three places. The last thing he heard on this earth was the crackle of a gun that had leaped into the hand of the smaller rider, Tuss Sloan. And the gun-slinger charging up beside the segundo of Satch Burr's gun spread sank, holding his belly as his own Colt slid from powerless fingers.

Tuss sent his cayuse charging right for the hotel steps. He was up, landing atop them, wheeling to cover the stunned street with two cocked guns. Head had given him that second just before they had moved in. Head himself made a neat one-leg landing and snatched his crutch under him and had his Colt bore swivelling. Then Tuss Sloan was diving through the doorway of the hotel.

Head Hagers waited impatiently a few seconds. Then the marshal swung down to take command with his grim-faced bunch and Head turned and stomped after Tuss.

Tuss Sloan was already on that second floor, dashing down to the combined business and living suite of the late Abel Reach. He knew he would find Satch Burr there.

The door to the waiting room was locked. Backing up, Tuss stormed at it. It gave under the impact of his hunched shoulder and glass splattered over his black sombrero. He bulled inside just in time to see Satch Burr, bootless but fully clothed even to his white calfskin vest otherwise, dashing through to a forward window to learn what the trouble was.

The kid became spinx-faced behind a thin grin. "'S all right, Head," he said in a tight voice, then flashed the newly-donned deputy's badge on his yellow shirt front. "Just came down to make an arrest. Not you—"

He had glided forward to the door of the room from which Satch had just run. Inside, sitting up as she clutched the bed-

sheets, brassy hair ghastly in the early morning, was the woman called Doll. This card had to be played carefully, Tuss knew. It was the one that could save him from the charge of murdering Abel Reach.

"'Morning, ma'am," he said as he gently but firmly shoved the dumbfounded Satch in before him. "Right sorry to bother you. But you're wanted' down at the jail."

She choked on a yawn. "Satch, is the fool locoed or—"

"Our men have the place surrounded, ma'am," Tuss went on. "We got a white leather glove down at the jail—a lady's glove. It was found here when Abel Reach was shot. We aim to see if it fits you, ma'am." His gun swung idly in his hand. But the muzzle was never more than half an inch off range of the ashen Satch Burr's body. He seemed to be having trouble in breathing.

It worked. Doll was out to save her own hide first of all. She screeched an oath. "All right. You go with me, Satch! You it was who put me up to playin' up to that fool lawyer and coming here to see him. You gotta stand by me and—"

Satch Burr sensed the game was up. His own hide came first. When, from down the hall he heard the real Head Hagers' roar, he had to play his last chip. Shrugging, fat jowls shaking, he half-hoisted his hands and headed around the far side of the bed. "All right, fella. But you don't mind letting me git my boots fust, I hope an'—" The next instant, he had seized Doll out from under the covers and swung her night-gown clad body in front of him. Kicking open the door leading to the adjoining room, he backed through, then dropped her heavily.

Satch Burr slid outside the door. It was just in time to see Head Hagers' back as he passed, seeking Tuss. Satch struck despite his wounded arm, bringing his barrel down across the real Head's skull. The latter careened on his crutch against a wall. The impersonator fled down the hall.

Tuss came plowing through the doorway. Hunched almost double, Satch shot his *left* hand in under his vest for a hideout weapon. This was showdown gunning and he was using his left. Playing the role of Head, he had had to use the right. Like a striking snake, his arm slashed out with the weapon cocking. And Tuss was just clearing his dad's black spade ace Colt from its holster.

Then he saw something. Satch Burr

hadn't had time to button his shirt cuffs that morning. And the cuff of his left had caught against his vest as he went in for the draw, pulled up the sleeve. It still hung that way. And Tuss Sloan couldn't miss the red arrow-like scar running up that bared forearm beneath the hanging lamp of the hotel corridor.

It was the man who had dry-gulched his father. He knew that now. Things fitted together in a flash even as the black bore of Satch's gun seemed to leap at him. Tobias coming home from that last trip and mentioning in a strange way how he had run into Head Haggars in Broken Wheel Junction. It was plain to the kid now. Naturally Tobias had known it was not the real Head. Maybe words had passed. And finally, Satch Burr had trailed him down to blot him out before he could upset his plans.

Something seemed to take his arm and literally throw it up and that gun in it. His wrist snapped as he cleared the holster top and switched sideward. Then he was grinning crazily through a swirl of acrid powder

smoke as he slammed that trigger. A slug ripped the top of his other hand. But he ignored it then.

There was a slam from the other end. Panting, Tuss advanced a few steps. And he saw Satch Burr, sitting against the wall, glassy-eyed, a slug hole through one cheekbone and an ebbing trickle of blood from his chest. Tuss had avenged his father.

There was a roar as old Head Haggars pulled himself away from the wall in the rear. "Ol' Tobe himself couldn't uh—"

"Don't try it, Doll!" Carmencia's low voice stabbed in like a knife. The two men whirled to see Doll lowering her .41 derringer despairingly in the office waiting room. She had been facing Tuss' back. And behind her, pale but steady-handed, Carmencia stood in the bedroom door with a .38 covering the other woman.

Carmencia smiled wanly at Tuss. "The female is often more deadly than the male, sometimes. . . . Tuss, please get me a glass of water—now that the shooting is over!"

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LAW WEST OF THE PECOS

by Kenneth P. Wood

When men were men and law rode in the holster, "Judge" Roy Bean held a full house in the gamble that was life!

DURING the latter part of the past century the vast region of western Texas had no law or regulation whatever. It was a country where every man's hand was against every other man's hand, where "ilka mon kept his ain gear wie his ain grip." Here were the real bad lands, an isolated corner of the United States somewhat larger than the combined area of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, harboring more desperate criminals than any other section in America. It was Badman's Paradise!

Into this untamed frontier came Roy Bean, a long-legged fighting fool from the South, with a slow drawl, a sharp eye, and a gun-hand as swift as light. He was a vital and picturesque character. Born in Kentucky, Bean went to Sante Fe, New Mexico, in 1845, at the age of sixteen. Two years later he fought with the United States troops in Mexico. After his discharge he set up in business at San Gabriel, California. About 1860 he was hauling freight

Law West of the Pecos

from San Antonio, Texas, to Chihuahua, Mexico.

When the Southern Pacific strung its first rails across west Texas Bean went along with the construction crews. Finally he opened a trading post at Vina Gardone, in Val Verde County. One day Lily Langtry was passing through by a train that happened to stop for a few minutes at Roy Bean's town, then as now, merely a frontier crossroads. But the beautiful actress admired the place, and that so pleased the fighting trader that he had the town renamed "Langtry," by which it is still known today.

Roy Bean was made justice of the peace in the early 1880's at the instance of the officials of the Southern Pacific Railroad because he was the man best suited to handle the "wild and woolly" element in this vast new area that had few law-abiding citizens but countless outlaws, renegade Mexicans and warlike Indians. "Judge" Roy Bean at once slapped up a huge sign across the front of his rude quarters and set to work putting the fear of the law into the residents of his vast territory. His office was within a dingy log building, which served the threefold purpose of saloon, outfitting post and dwelling—here was the seat of justice. His big sign read:—

*Judge Roy Bean, Notary Public
Law West of the Pecos
Mixed Drinks*

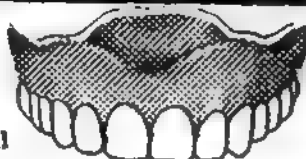
Those words were no idle boast. Roy Bean was not an exponent of the law, but the law itself. The "judge" held court, with a formidable-looking sixshooter shoved in his belt. From a battered and scarred table which served as the judicial stand, he was called upon to settle all

(Continued On Page 106)

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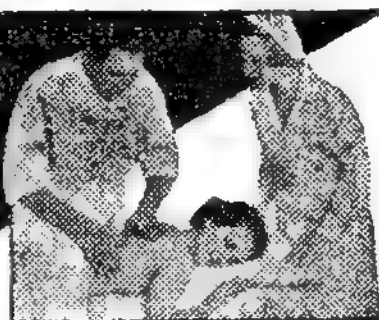
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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 105)

manner of disputes. He tried court cases, granted divorces and handed down verdicts without the trammel of a jury or other assistants. Frequently he acted in the capacity of clergyman, executioner and coroner. Whatever decisions he made were final, absolute, and binding. The only manner of appeal was with a sixgun.

It is said that Bean's drinks were on a par with his law, and that his liquid barbed wire was also dispensed with a sixpistol. The lanky fighting man dealt out justice with a speed and rigor that have no parallels in the annals of border history. This was necessary in a wilderness country where there was no regulation to protect the peaceable settler, and where his only means of winning his rights were his muscles and his firearms.

But withal Roy Bean was a likeable character. Some of his unique decisions rival those propounded by the Biblical Solomon. He was witty and very often humorous in his role as jurist.

One night a hard-case wayfarer accosted him on a lonely road and with a menacing attitude, demanded monetary assistance. The judge's reply is typical:

"I have little about me, but that little we will share. This Colt," he said, producing a revolver from under the tails of his frock coat, "has six chambers. I will give yo'all three!" The next moment the judge found himself all alone.

On another occasion four quarreling ranchers came to him with a dispute over water rights. Three of them told corroborative stories, while the fourth, a grizzled oldster with only one eye, persistently injected all

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Law West of the Pecos

manner of conflicting and confusing evidence. It was quite obvious that the one-eyed man was not telling the truth, and Bean knew it. Finally the judge wearied of it all and, pushing back his rickety chair, stood up to his full height.

"Yo'all tell me that story agin, boys," he said with gravity, one hand resting upon the handle of his Colt. "But tell me one at a time—and the first hombre I catch lying, I'll shoot his other eye out!"

ANOTHER time the judge sentenced a man to the state penitentiary, where he was confined for two years before the prisoner's attorney ferreted out the fact that Bean was no judge at all but merely a justice of the peace, who had no legal right to commit a person to a long term of imprisonment.

In another instance a drunk fell from a high bridge over the Pecos River and broke his neck on the bank below. The matter was promptly brought before Roy Bean, the dispenser of "Law West of the Pecos." He discovered that the pockets of the unfortunate contained a revolver and forty-one dollars in cash. Inasmuch as the pistol was not in an open holster and exposed, he fined the dead man twenty-five dollars and costs for carrying a "concealed" weapon, and appropriated the forty-one dollars and gun in settlement.

Once, when a customer killed a Chinaman in Bean's barroom, the sage consulted his thumb-marked and dog-eared statute books, but finding nothing in reference to the murder of a Chinaman in a saloon, discharged the killer as having committed no offense.

There was another incident concerning a Chinaman—a case in which

(Continued On Page 108)



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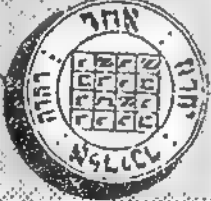
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(Continued From Page 107)

the yellow man's rights were sustained—and he was given more than the proverbial "Chinaman's chance."

To Bean's drink emporium there came one day the notorious Bat Masterson, one-time scout, journalist, lawman, and on occasion, all-around disturber of the peace. He was accompanied by a grim-jawed crew of hard-boiled riders who were hungry, thirsty and saddle-weary. Of course considerable liquor was consumed, after which the whole crowd chorused loudly for something to eat. Bean's only waiter, a Chinaman, scurried about as fast as he could to serve the boisterous mob. He was doing his very best, but it was no easy task to satisfy everybody at once.

At the table, next to the judge sat Masterson. Before long he was to give up his reckless ways and become a good citizen, but at that time he was still riding with the unreformed. He was a hard and dangerous individual and, that night at the trading post, he was feeling disagreeable and tired.

It seemed to Masterson that the Chinese waiter was not getting around as quickly as he might, so Bat started to admonish him. Poor John Chinaman replied to the effect that he was doing all he possibly could to give prompt service, whereat Masterson decided to correct him with the butt of his .45.

Bean had been sitting quietly at his side, saying nothing. But just as Masterson raised his gun, the judge clutched Bat's arm in midair.

"Don't yo'all hit that man!" he warned, and there was finality in his tone.

Masterson wheeled.

"Maybe you'd like to take it up?" he shot back.

Law West of the Pecos

Bean regarded him unflinchingly for a moment.

"I done took it up!" was his quiet rejoinder.

The weapon was immediately holstered. Bat Masterson spoke no word, but reflected silently while he waited for his food. Perhaps that was the beginning of his reform. Anyway, it was the manner in which Judge Roy Bean handed down decisions and administered law west of the Pecos.

From the time of his appointment Roy Bean served without reelection or reappointment until the early 1890's, when he was legally and properly elected, after which he served for a few years more. His "Temple of Justice," rickety and crude, still stands by the side of the road where the Southern Pacific makes it a show place on the line in that part of Texas.

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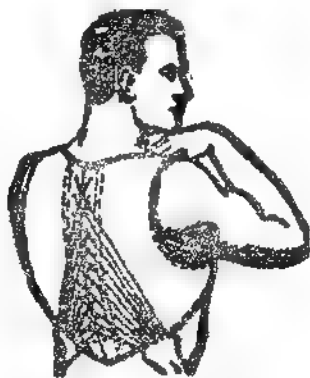
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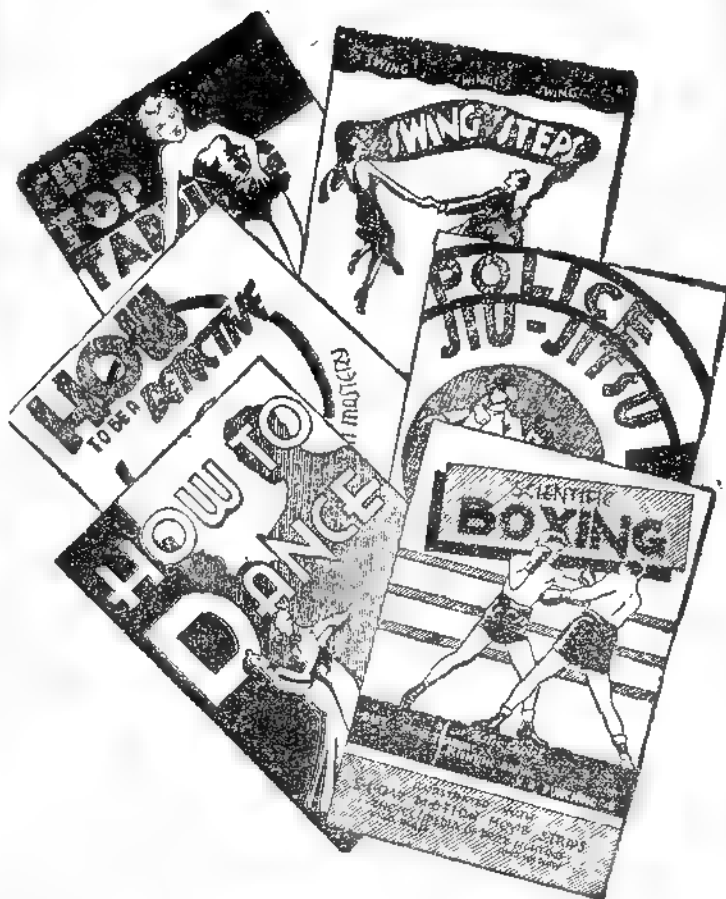
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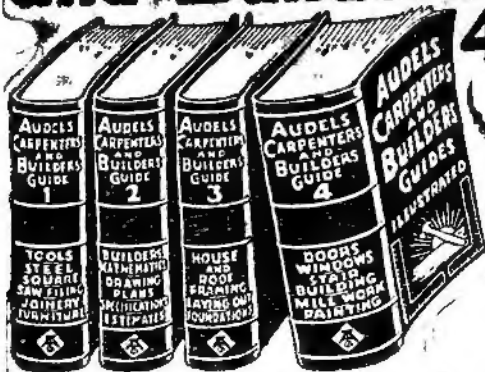
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MAIL COUPON NOW FOR COMPLETE DETAILS

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ELGIN TOWER, Suite 1-70-0
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NEW 1942 Duo-Therms meet America's needs with new savings on fuel oil...new burner economy...new Power-Air Blower...new beauty!

DUO-THERM, the biggest selling fuel-oil heater, is now more than ever the heater for America to buy. For—at a time when fuel-oil conservation is most important—Duo-Therm offers *greater* economy of operation than ever before.

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Power-Air—exclusive with Duo-Therm—starts where ordinary heaters leave off. As Duo-Therm's patented Dual-Chamber Burner generates clean odorless heat, *Power-Air* distributes it quickly, *evenly* to every corner. Healthful warmth is kept *circulating*—on the move. And *Power-Air* is adjustable, to give you just the amount of circulation desired. Floors are no longer cold... hard-to-heat spots are flooded with warmth. Duo-Therm's power-driven heat is the secret of *lower* fuel bills. *You save up to 25% on fuel costs* over a heater without *Power-Air*.

Most beautiful heaters ever built!

Duo-Therm gives you beautiful new streamlined models that surpass anything you've ever seen in a heater. And what convenience! No work, no ashes, no coal, no wood! When you get up in the morning simply twist the Handy Front Dial—Duo-Therm floods heat into your home *quickly*—*Power-Air* keeps it



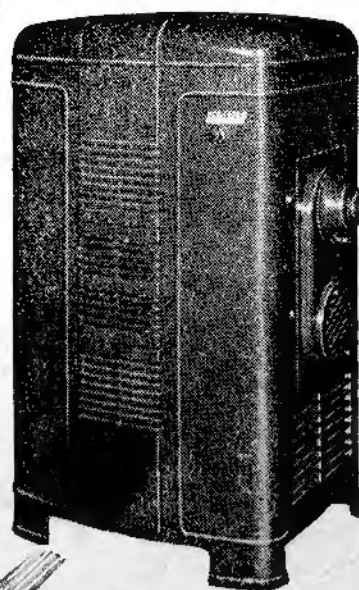
moving so you don't huddle around the heater to get warm. When the house is warm and comfortable, twist the dial again and Duo-Therm loafs along, sending out just enough gentle heat. You have complete *flame-control* at all times... exactly the degree of heat you want.

Extra features!

Duo-Therm's *Radiant Doors* open to give floods of "fireplace" warmth! *Special Waste-Stopper* saves fuel. *Coordinated Control* insures proper draft for perfect combustion. *Safe!* Duo-Therms are listed as standard by the Underwriters' Laboratories.

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Your friends will rave about the beauty of the new models—as beautiful as any piece of fine furniture. And *you'll* rave about the precision engineering that means years of heating comfort at a big saving in fuel costs! You'll know you've bought a bargain in quality!



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Meanwhile, send the coupon below today for complete information!



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